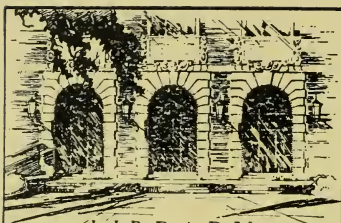


TINY

LUTTRELL

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TINY LUTTRELL

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

A BRIDE FROM THE BUSH.
UNDER TWO SKIES.

TINY LUTTRELL

BY

ERNEST WILLIAM HORNUNG

VOL. I

CASSELL & COMPANY LIMITED

LONDON PARIS & MELBOURNE

1893

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TINY LUTTRELL.



CHAPTER I.

THE COMING OF TINY.

SWIFT of Wallandoon was visibly distraught. He had driven over to the township in the heat of the afternoon to meet the coach. The coach was just in sight, which meant that it could not arrive for at least half an hour. Yet nothing would induce Swift to wait quietly in the hotel verandah; he paid no sort of attention to the publican who pressed him to do so. The iron roofs of the little township crackled to the sun with a sound as of distant musketry; their sharp-edged shadows lay on the sand like sheets of zinc that might be lifted up in one piece; and a hot wind in full blast played steadily upon Swift's neck and ears. He had pulled up in the

shade, and was leaning forward, with his wide-awake tilted over his nose, and his eyes on a cloud of dust between the bellying sandhills and the dark-blue sky. The cloud advanced, revealing from time to time a growing speck. That speck was the coach which Swift had come to meet.

He was a young man with broad shoulders and good arms, and a general air of smartness and alacrity about which there could be no mistake. He had dark hair and a fair moustache; his eye was brown and alert; and much wind and sun had reddened a face that commonly gave the impression of complete capability with a sufficiency of force. This afternoon, however, Swift lacked the confident look of the thoroughly capable young man. And he was even younger than he looked; he was young enough to fancy that the owner of Wallandoon, who was a passenger by the approaching coach, had travelled five hundred miles expressly to deprive

John Swift of the fine position to which recent good luck had promoted him.

He could think of nothing else to bring Mr. Luttrell all the way from Melbourne at the time of year when a sheep-station causes least anxiety. The month was April, there had been a fair rainfall since Christmas, and only in his last letter Mr. Luttrell had told Swift that all he need do for the present was to take care of the fences and let the sheep take care of themselves. The next news was a telegram to the effect that Mr. Luttrell was coming up-country to see for himself how things were going at Wallandoon. Having stepped into the manager-ship by an accident, and even so merely as a trial man, young Swift at once made sure that his trial was at an end. It did not strike him that in spite of his youth he was the ideal person for the post. Yet this was obvious. He had five years' experience of the station he was to manage. The like merit is not often in the

market. Swift seemed to forget that. Neither did he take comfort from the fact that Mr. Luttrell was an old friend of his family in Victoria, and hitherto his own highly-satisfied employer. Hitherto, or until the last three months, he had not tried to manage Mr. Luttrell's station. If he had failed in that time to satisfy his owner, then he would at once go elsewhere; but for many things he wished most keenly to stay at Wallandoon; and he was thinking of these things now, while the coach grew before his eyes.

Of his five years on Wallandoon, the last two had been infinitely less enjoyable than the three that had gone before. There was a simple reason for the difference. Until two years ago Mr. Luttrell had himself managed the station, and had lived there with his wife and family. That had answered fairly well while the family were young, thanks to a competent governess for the girls. But when

the girls grew up it became time to make a change. The squatter was a wealthy man, and he could perfectly well afford the substantial house which he had already built for himself in a Melbourne suburb. The social splashing of his wife and daughters after their long seclusion in the wilderness was also easily within his means, if not entirely to his liking; but he was a mild man married to a weak woman; and he happened to be bent upon a little splash on his own account in politics. Choosing out of many applicants the best possible manager for Wallandoon, the squatter presently entered the Victorian legislature, and embraced the new interests so heartily that he was nearly two years in discovering his best possible manager to be both a failure and a fraud.

It was this discovery that had given Swift an opening whose very splendour accounted for his present doubts and fears. Had his chance been spoilt by Herbert Luttrell, who had lately

been on Wallandoon as Swift's overseer, for some ten days only, when the two young fellows had failed to pull together? This was not likely, for Herbert at his worst was an honest ruffian, who had taken the whole blame (indeed it was no more than his share) of that fiasco. Swift, however, could think of nothing else; nor was there time; for now the coach was so close that the crack of the driver's whip was plainly heard, and above the cluster of heads on the box a white handkerchief fluttered against the sky.

The publican whom Swift had snubbed addressed another remark to him from the verandah:—

“There's a petticoat on board.”

“So I see.”

The coach came nearer.

“She's your boss's daughter,” affirmed the publican—“the best of 'em.”

“So you're cracking!”

“ Well, wait a minute. What now ? ”

Swift prolonged the minute. “ You’re right,” he said, hastily tying his reins to the brake.

“ I am so.”

“ Heaven help me ! ” muttered Swift, as he jumped to the ground. “ There’s nothing ready for her. They might have told one ! ”

A moment later five heaving horses stood sweating in the sun, and Swift reaching up his hand received from a gray-bearded gentleman on the box-seat a grip from which his doubts and fears should have died on the spot. If they did, however, it was only to make way for a new and unlooked-for anxiety ; for little Miss Luttrell was smiling down at him through a brown gauze veil, as she poked away the handkerchief she had waved, leaving a corner showing against her dark brown jacket ; and how she was to be made comfortable at the homestead, all in a minute, Swift did not know.

“ She insisted on coming,” said Mr. Luttrell,

with a smile. "Is it any good her getting down?"

"Can you take me in?" asked the girl.

"We'll do our best," said Swift, holding the ladder for her descent.

Her shoes made a daintier imprint in the sand than it had known for two whole years. She smiled as she gave her hand to Swift; it was small too, and Swift had not touched a lady's hand for many months. There was very little of her altogether, but the little was entirely pleasing. Embarrassed though he was, Swift was more than pleased to see the young girl again, and her smiles that struggled through the brown gauze like sunshine through a mist. She had not worn gauze veils two years ago; and two years ago she had been content with fare that would scarcely please her to-day, while naturally the living at the station was rougher now than in the days of the ladies. It was all very well for her to smile. She ought never to have

come without a word of warning. Swift felt responsible and aggrieved.

He helped Mr. Luttrell to carry their baggage from the coach to the buggy drawn up in the shade. Miss Luttrell went to the horses' heads and stroked their noses ; they were Bushman and Brownlock, the old safe pair she had many a time driven herself. In a moment she was bidden to jump up. There had been very little luggage to transfer. The most cumbrous piece was a hamper, of which Swift formed expectations that were speedily confirmed. For Miss Luttrell remarked, pointing to the hamper as she took her seat—

“At least we have brought our own rations ; but I am afraid they will make you horribly uncomfortable behind there ? ”

Swift was on the back seat. “Not a bit,” he answered ; “I was much more uncomfortable until I saw the hamper.”

“Don't you worry about us, Jack,” said Mr.

Luttrell as they drove off. "Whatever you do, don't worry about Tiny. Give her travellers' rations and send her to the travellers' hut. That's all she deserves, when she wasn't on the way-bill. She insisted on coming at the last moment; I told her it wasn't fair."

"But it's very jolly," said Swift gallantly.

"It was just like her," Mr. Luttrell chuckled; "she's as unreliable as ever."

The girl had been looking radiantly about her as they drove along the single broad, straggling street of the township. She now turned her head to Swift, and her eyes shot through her veil in a smile. That abominable veil went right over her broad-brimmed hat, and was gathered in and made fast at the neck. Swift could have torn it from her head; he had not seen a lady's smile for months. Also, he was beginning to make the astonishing discovery that somehow she was altered, and he was curious to see how much, which was impossible through the gauze.

“Is that true?” he asked her. He had known her for five years.

“I suppose so,” she returned carelessly; and immediately her sparkling eyes wandered. “There’s old Mackenzie in the post-office verandah. He was a detestable old man, but I must wave to him; it’s so good to be back!”

“But you own to being unreliable?” persisted Swift.

“I don’t know,” Miss Luttrell said, tossing the words to him over her shoulder, because her attention was not for the manager. “Is it so very dreadful if I am? What’s the good of being reliable? It’s much more amusing to take people by surprise. Your face was worth the journey when you saw me on the coach! But you see I haven’t surprised Mackenzie; he doesn’t look the least impressed; I dare say he thinks it was last week we all went away. I hate him!”

"Here are the police barracks," said Swift, seeing that all her interest was in the old landmarks; "we have a new sergeant since you left."

"If *he's* in *his* verandah I shall shout out to him who I am, and how long I have been away, and how good it is to get back."

"She's quite capable of doing it," Mr. Luttrell chimed in, chuckling afresh; "there's never any knowing what she'll do next."

But the barracks verandah was empty, and it was the last of the township buildings. There was now nothing ahead but the rim of scrub beyond which, among the sand-hills, sweltered the homestead of Wallandoon.

"I've come back with a nice character, have I not?" the girl now remarked, turning to Swift with another smile.

"You must have earned it; I can quite believe that you have," laughed Swift. He had known her in short dresses.

“Ha ! ha ! You see he remembers all about you, my dear.”

“Do you, Jack ? ” the girl said.

“Do I not ! ” said Jack.

And he said no more. He was grateful to her for addressing him, though only once, by his Christian name. He had been intimate with the whole family, and it seemed both sensible and pleasant to resume a friendly footing from the first. He would have called the girl by her Christian name too, only this was so seldom heard among her own people. Tiny she was by nature, and Tiny she had been by name also, from her cradle. Certainly she had been Tiny to Swift two years ago, and already she had called him Jack ; but he saw in neither circumstance any reason why she should be Tiny to him still. It was different from a proper name. Her proper name was Christina, but unreliable though she confessedly was, she might perhaps be relied upon to jeer if he came

out with that. And he would not call her "Miss Luttrell." He thought about it and grew silent; but this was because his thoughts had glided from the girl's name to the girl herself.

She had surprised him in more ways than one: in so many ways that already he stood almost in awe of the little person whom formerly he had known so well. Christina had changed, as it was only natural that she should have changed; but because we are prone to picture our friends as last we saw them, no matter how long ago, not less natural was Swift's surprise. It was unreasoning, however, and not the kind of surprise to last. In a few minutes his wonder was that Christina had changed so little. To look at her, she had scarcely changed at all. A certain finality of line was perceptible in the figure, but if anything she was thinner than of old. As for her face, what he could see of it through the maddening gauze was the face of

Swift's memory. Her voice was a little different ; in it was a ring of curiously deliberate irony, charming at first as a mere affectation. A more noteworthy alteration had taken place in her manner : she had acquired the manner of a finished young woman of the world and of society. Already she had shown that she could become considerably excited without forfeiting any of the grace and graciousness and self-possession that were now conspicuously hers ; and before the homestead was reached she exhibited such a saintly sweetness in repose as only enhanced the lambent devilry playing about most of her looks and tones. If Swift was touched with awe in her presence, that can hardly be wondered at in one who went for months together without setting eyes upon a lady.

The drive was a long one : so long that when they sighted the homestead it came between them and the setting sun. The main building with its

long regular roof lay against the red sky like some monstrous ingot. The hot wind had fallen, and the station pines stood motionless, drawn in ink. As they drove through the last gate they could hear the dogs barking; and Christina distinguished the voice of her own old short-haired collie, which she had bequeathed to Swift, who was repaid for the sound with a final smile. He hardly knew why, but this look made the girl's old self live to him as neither look nor word had done yet, though her face was turned away from the light, and the stupid veil still fell before it.

But the less fascinating side of her arrival was presently engaging his attention. He hastily interviewed Mrs. Duncan, an elderly godsend new to the place since the Luttrells had left it, and never so invaluable as now. Into Mrs. Duncan's hands Christina willingly submitted herself, for she was really tired out. Swift did not see her again until supper, which afforded

further proofs of Mrs. Duncan's merits in a time of need. Meanwhile, Mr. Luttrell had finally disabused him of the foolish fears he had entertained while waiting for the coach. Swift's youth, which has shown itself in these fears, comes out also in the ease with which he now forgot them. They had made him unhappy for three whole days; yet he dared to feel indignant because his owner, who had confirmed his command instead of dismissing him from it, chose to talk Sheep at the supper table. Swift seemed burning to hear of the eldest Miss Luttrell, who was Miss Luttrell no longer, having married a globe-trotting Londoner during her first season and gone Home. He asked Christina several questions about Ruth (whose other name he kept forgetting) and her husband. But Mr. Luttrell lost no chance of rounding up the conversation and yarding it in the sheep-pens; and Swift had the ingratitude to resent this. Still more did he resent the hour

he was forced to spend in the store after supper, examining the books and discussing recent results and future plans with Mr. Luttrell, while his subordinate, the storekeeper, enjoyed the society of Christina. The business in the store was not only absurdly premature, and irksome in itself, but it made it perfectly impossible for Swift to hear any more that night of the late Ruth Luttrell, whose present name was not to be remembered. He found it hard to possess his soul in patience and to answer questions satisfactorily under such circumstances. For an hour, indeed, he did both ; but the station-store faced the main building, and when Tiny Luttrell appeared in the verandah of the latter with a lighted candle in her hand, he could do neither any longer. Saying candidly that he must bid her good-night, he hurried out of the store and across the yard, and was in time to catch Christina at one end of the broad verandah which entirely surrounded the house.

At supper Mr. Luttrell had made him take

the head of the table, by virtue of his office, declaring that he himself was merely a visitor. And on the strength of that, Swift was perhaps justified now in adding a host's apology to his good-night. "I'm afraid you'll have to rough it most awfully," was what he said.

"Far from it. You have given me my old room, the one we papered with *Australasians*, if you remember; they are only a little more fly-blown than they used to be."

This was Christina's reply, which naturally led to more.

"But it won't be as comfortable as it used to be," said Swift unhappily; "and it won't be what you are accustomed to nowadays."

"Never mind, it's the dearest little den in the Colonies!"

"That sounds as if you were glad to get back to Riverina?"

"Glad? No one knows how glad I am."

One person knew now. The measure of

her gladness was expressed in her face not less than in her tones, and it was no ordinary measure. Over the candle she held in her hand Swift was enabled for the first time to peer unobstructedly into her face. He found it more winsome than ever, but he noticed some ancient blemishes under the memorable eyes. She had, in fact, some freckles, which he recognised with the keenest joy. She might stoop to a veil: she had not sunk to doctoring her complexion; she had come back to the bush an incomplete worldling after all. Yet there was that in her face which made him feel a stranger to her still.

“Do you know,” he said, smiling, “that I’m in a great funk of you? I can’t say quite what it is, but somehow you’re so grand. I suppose it’s Melbourne.”

Miss Luttrell thanked him, bowing so low that her candle shed grease upon the boards. “You’ve altered, too,” she added in his own

manner; "I suppose it's being boss. But I haven't seen enough of you to be sure. You evidently told off your new storekeeper to entertain me for the evening. He is a trying young man; he *will* talk. But of course he is a new chum fresh from Home."

"Still he's a very good little chap; but it wasn't my fault that he and I didn't change places. Mr. Luttrell wanted to speak to me about several things, besides glancing through the books; I thought we might have put it off, and I wondered how you were getting on. By the way, it struck me once or twice that your father was coming up to give me the sack; and it's just the reverse, for now I'm permanent manager."

He told her this with a natural exultation, but she did not seem impressed by it. "Do you know why he did come up?" she asked him.

"Yes; for his Easter holidays, chiefly."

"And why I would come with him?"

"No; I'm afraid we never mentioned you. I suppose you came for a holiday too?"

"Shall I tell you why I did come?"

"I wish you would."

"Well, I came to say good-bye to Wallandoon," said Christina solemnly.

"You're going to be married!" exclaimed Swift, with conviction, but with perfect nonchalance.

"Not if I know it," cried Christina. "Are you?"

"Not I."

"But there's Miss Trevor of Meringul!"

"I see them once in six months."

"That may be in the bond."

"Well, never mind Miss Trevor of Meringul. You haven't told me how it is you've come to say good-bye to the station, Miss Luttrell of Wallandoon."

"Then I'll tell you, seriously: it's because I sail for England on the fourth of May."

“ For England ! ”

“ Yes, and I’m not at all keen about it, I can tell you. But I’m not going to see England, I’m going to see Ruth ; Australia’s worth fifty Englands any day.”

Swift had recovered from his astonishment. “ I don’t know,” he said doubtfully ; “ most of us would like a trip Home, you know, just to see what the old country’s like ; though I dare say it isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“ Of course it isn’t. I hate it ! ”

“ But if you’ve never been there ? ”

“ I judge from the people—from the samples they send out. Your new storekeeper is one ; you meet worse down in Melbourne. Herbert’s going with me ; he’s going to Cambridge, if they’ll have him. Didn’t you know that ? But he could go alone, and if it wasn’t for Ruth I wouldn’t cross Hobson’s Bay to see their old England ! ”

The serious bitterness of her tone struck him

afterwards as nothing less than grotesque ; but at the moment he was gazing into her face—thoughtfully, yet without thoughts.

“It’s good for Herbert,” he said presently. “I couldn’t do anything with him here: he offered to fight me when I tried to make him work. I suppose he will be three or four years at Cambridge ; but how long are you going to stay with Mrs.—Mrs. Ruth ? ”

“How stupid you are at remembering a simple name ! Do try to remember that her name is Holland. I beg your pardon, Jack, but you have been really very forgetful this evening. I think it must be Miss Trevor of Meringul.”

“It isn’t. I’m very sorry. But you haven’t told me how long you think of staying at Home.”

“How long ? ” said the young girl lightly. “It may be for years and years, and it may be for ever and ever ! ”

He looked at her strangely, and she darted out her hand.

“ Good-night again, Jack.”

“ Good-night again.”

What with the pauses, each of them an excellent opportunity for Christina to depart, that had taken them some ten minutes to say which ought not to have lasted one. But you must know that this was nothing to their last good-night, on the self-same spot two years before, when she had rested in his arms.

CHAPTER II.

SWIFT OF WALLANDOON.

CHRISTINA was awakened in the morning by the holland blind flapping against her open window. It was a soft insinuating sound, that awoke one gradually, and to Christina both the cause and the awakening itself seemed incredibly familiar. So had she lain and listened in the past, as each day broke in her brain. When she opened her eyes the shadow of the sash wriggled on the blind as it flapped, a blade of sunshine lay under the door that opened upon the verandah, and neither sight was new to her. The same sheets of the *Australasian* with which her own hands had once lined the room, for want of a conventional wall-paper, lined it still; the same area of printed matter was in focus from the pillow,

and she actually remembered an advertisement that caught her eye. It used to catch her eye two years before. Thus it became difficult to believe in those two years; and it was very pleasant to disbelieve in them. More than pleasant Christina found it to lie where she was, hearing the old noises (the horses were run up before she rose), seeing the old things, and dreaming that the last two years were themselves a dream. Her life as it stood was a much less charming composition than several possible arrangements of the same material, impossible now. This is not strange, but it was a little strange that neither sweet impossibilities nor bitter actualities fascinated her much; for so many good girls are morbidly introspective. As for Christina, let it be clearly and early understood that she was neither an introspective girl by nature nor a particularly good one from any point of view. She was not in the habit of looking back; but to look back on the old days

here at the station without thinking of later days was like reading an uneven book for the second time, leaving out the poor part.

In making, but still more in closing that gap in her life (as you close a table after taking out a leaf) she was immensely helped by the associations of the present moment. They breathed of the remote past only ; their breath was sweet and invigorating. Her affection for Wallandoon was no affectation ; she loved it as she loved no other place. And if, as she dressed, her thoughts dwelt more on the young manager of the station than on the station itself, that only illustrates the difference between an association and an associate. There is human interest in the one : but it does not follow that Tiny Luttrell was immoderately interested in Jack Swift. Even to herself she denied that she had ever done more than like him very much. To some " nonsense " in the past she was ready to own. But in the vocabulary of a Tiny Luttrell a little

“nonsense” may cover a calendar of mild crimes. It is only the Jack Swifts who treat the nonsense seriously and deny that the crimes are anything of the sort, because for their part they “mean it.” Women are not deceived. Besides, it is less shame for them to say they never meant it.

“He must marry Flo Trevor of Meringul,” Christina said aloud. “It’s what we all expect of him. It’s his duty. But she isn’t pretty, poor thing!”

The remarks happened to be made to Christina’s own reflection in the glass. She, as we know, was very pretty indeed. Her small head was finely turned, and carried with her own natural grace. Her hair was of so dark a brown as to be nearly black, but there was not enough of it to hide the charming contour of her head. If she could have had the altering of one feature, she would probably have shortened her lips; but their red freshness justified their

length ; and the crux of a woman's beauty, her nose, happened to be Christina's best point. Her eyes were a sweeter one. Their depth of blue is seen only under dark blue skies, and they seemed the darker for her hair. But with all her good features, because she was not an English girl, but an Australian born and bred, she had no complexion to speak of, being pale and slightly freckled. Yet no one held that those blemishes prevented her from being pretty ; while some maintained that they did not even detract from her good looks, and a few that they saved her from perfection and were a part of her charm. The chances are that the authorities quoted were themselves her admirers one and all. She had many such. To most of them her character had the same charm as her face ; it, too, was freckled, with faults for which they loved her the more.

One of the many she met presently, but one of them now, though in his day the first of all.

Swift was hastening along the verandah as she issued forth, a consciously captivating figure in her clean white frock. He had on his wideawake, a newly-filled water-bag dripped as he carried it, the drops drying under their eyes in the sun, and Christina foresaw at once his absence for the day. She was disappointed, perhaps because he was one of the many; certainly it was for this reason she did not let him see her disappointment. He told her that he was going with her father to the out-station. That was fourteen miles away. It meant a lonely day for Christina at the homestead. So she said that a lonely day there was just what she wanted, to overhaul the dear old place all by herself, and to revel in it like a child without feeling that she was being watched. But she told a franker story some hours later, when Swift found her still on the verandah where he had left her—but this was now the shady side—seated in a wicker chair and frowning at a book. For she promptly

flung away that crutch of her solitude, and seemed really glad to see him. Her look made him tingle. He sat down on the edge of the verandah and leaned his back against a post. Then he inquired, rather diffidently, how the day had gone with Miss Luttrell.

"I am ashamed to tell you," said Christina graciously, for though his diffidence irritated her she was quite as glad to see him as she looked, "that I have been bored very nearly to death!"

"I knew you would be," Swift said quite bitterly; but his bitterness was against an absent man, who had gone indoors to rest.

"I don't see how you could know anything," remarked Christina. "I certainly didn't know it myself; and I'm very much ashamed of it, that's another thing! I love every stick about the place. But I never knew a hotter morning, the sand in the yard was like powdered cinders, and you can't go poking about very long when everything you touch is red-hot. Then one felt tired.

Mrs. Duncan took pity on me and came and talked to me ; she must be an acquisition to you, I am sure ; but her cooking's better than her conversation. I think she must have sent the new chum to me to take her place ; anyway I've had a dose of him, too, I can tell you ! ”

“ Oh, he's been cutting his work, has he ? ”

“ He has been doing the civil ; I think he considered that his work.”

“ And quite right too ! Tell me, what do you think of him ? ”

Christina made a grotesque grimace. “ He's such a little Englishman,” she simply said.

“ Well, he can't help that, you know,” said Swift, laughing ; “ and he's not half a bad little chap, as I told you last night.”

“ Oh, not a bit bad ; only typical. He has told me his history. It seems he missed the army at Home, front door and back, in spite of his crammer—I mean his cwammer. He was no use, so they sent him out to us.”

“ And he is gradually becoming of some use to us, or rather to me ; he really is,” protested Swift in the interests of fair play, which a man loves. “ You laugh, but I like the fellow. He’s much more use, forgive my saying so, than Herbert ever would have been—here. At all events he doesn’t want to fight! He’s willing, I will say that for him. And I think it was rather nice of him to tell you about himself.”

“ It’s nicer of you to think so,” said Christina to herself. And her glance softened so that he noticed the difference, for he was becoming sensitive to a slight but constant hardness of eye and tongue distressing to find in one’s divinity.

“ He went so far as to hint at an affair of the heart,” she said aloud, and he saw her eyes turn hard again, so that his own glanced off them and fell. But he forced a chuckle as he looked down.

“ Well, you gave him your sympathy there, I hope ? ”

“ Not I, indeed. I urged him to forget all about her : she has forgotten all about him long before now, you may be sure. He only thinks about her still because it’s pleasant to have somebody to think about at a lonely place like this ; and if she’s thinking about him it’s because he’s away in the wilderness and there’s a glamour about that. It wouldn’t prevent her marrying another man to-morrow, and it won’t prevent him making up to some other girl when he gets the chance.”

“ So that’s your experience, is it ? ”

“ Never mind whose experience it is. I advised the young man to give up thinking about the young woman, that’s all, and it’s my advice to every young man situated as he is.”

Swift was not amused. Yet he refused to believe that her advice was intended for himself, firstly because it was so coolly given, which was his ignorance, and secondly because literally speaking he was not himself situated as the

young Englishman was, which was merely unimaginative. In his determination, however, not to meet her in generalisations, but to get back to the storekeeper, he was wise enough.

“ I know something about his affairs, too,” he said quietly ; “ he’s the frankest little fellow in the world ; and I have given him very different advice, I must say.”

Tiny Luttrell bent down on him a gaze of fiendish innocence.

“ And what sort of advice does he give you, pray ? ”

“ You had better ask him,” said Swift, feebly but with effect, for he was honestly annoyed, and man enough to show it. As he spoke, indeed, he rose.

“ What, are you going ? ”

“ Yes ; you go in for being too hard altogether.”

“ I don’t go in for it. I am hard. I’m as hard as nails,” said Christina rapidly.

"So I see," he said, and another weak return was strengthened by his firmness; for he was going away as he spoke, and he never looked round.

"I wouldn't lose my temper," she called after him.

Her face was white. He disappeared. She coloured angrily.

"Now I hate you," she whispered to herself; but she probably respected him more, and that was as it only should have been long ago.

But Swift was in an awkward position, which indeed he deserved for the unsuspected passages that had once taken place between Tiny Luttrell and himself. It is true that those passages had occurred at the very end of the Luttrells' residence at Wallandoon: they had not been going on for a period preceding the end; but there is no denying that they were reprehensible in themselves, and pardonable only on the plea of exceeding earnestness. Swift

would not have made that excuse for himself, for he felt it to be a poor one, though of his own sincerity he was and had been unwaveringly sure. Beyond all doubt he was properly in love, and, being so, it was not until the girl stopped writing to him that he honestly repented the lengths to which he had been encouraged to go. It is easy to be blameless through the post, but they had kept up their perfectly blameless correspondence for a very few weeks, when Christina ceased firing; she was to have gone on for ever. He was just persistent enough to make it evident that her silence was intentional; then the silence became complete, and it was never again broken. For if Swift's self-control was limited, his self-respect was considerable, and this made him duly regret the limitations of his self-control. His boy's soul bled with a boy's generous regrets. He had kissed her, of course, and I wonder whose fault you think that was? I know which of them

regretted and which forgot it. The man would have given one of his fingers to have undone those kisses, that made him think less of himself and less of his darling. Nothing could make him love her less. He heard no more of her, but that made no difference. And now they were together again, and she was hard, and it made this difference: that he wanted her worse than ever, and for her own gain, now, as much as for his.

But two years had altered him also. In a manner he too was hardened; but he was simply a stronger, not a colder man. The muscles of his mind were set; his soul was now as sinewy as his body. He knew what he wanted, and what would not do for him instead. He wanted a great deal, but he meant having it or nothing. This time she should give him her heart before he took her hand; he swore it through his teeth; and you will realise how he must have known her of old even to have thought it.

The curious thing is that having shown him what she was she should have made him love her as he did. But that was Tiny Luttrell.

She was half witch, half coquette, and her superficial cynicism was but a new form of her coquetry. He liked it less than the unsophisticated methods of the old days. Indeed, he liked the girl less, while loving her more. She had given him the jar direct in one conversation, but even on indifferent subjects she spoke with a bitterness which he thoroughly disliked; while some of her prejudices he could not help thinking irredeemably absurd. As a shrill decrrier of England, for instance, she may have amused him, but he hardly admired her in that character. In a word, he thought her, and rightly, a good deal spoilt by her town life; but he hated towns, and it was a proof of her worth in his eyes that she was not hopelessly spoilt. He saw hope for her still—if she would marry him. He was a modest man in general, but he did feel this most

strongly. She was going to England without caring whether she went or not; she would do much better by marrying him and coming back to her old home in the bush. That home she loved, whether she loved him or not; in it she had grown up simple and credulous and sweet, with a wicked side that only picked out her sweetness; in it he believed that her life and his might yet be beautiful. The feeling made him sometimes rejoice that she had fallen a little out of love with her life, so that he might show her with all the effect of contrast what life and love really were; it thrilled his heart with generous throbs, it brought the moisture to his honest eyes, and it came to him oftener and with growing force as the days went on, by reason of certain signs they brought forth in Christina. Her voice lost its bitterness in his ears, not because he had grown used to notes that had jarred him in the beginning, but because the discordant strings came gradually into tune.

Her freshness came back to her with the charm and influence of the wilderness she loved ; her old self lived again to Jack Swift. On the other hand, she came to realise her own delight in the old good life as she had never realised it before ; she felt that henceforward she should miss it as she had not missed it yet. Now she could have defined her sensations and given reasons for them. She spent many hours in the saddle, on a former mount of hers that Swift had run up for her ; often he rode with her, and the scent of the pines, the swelling of the sand-hills against the sky, the sense of Nothing between the horses' ears and the sunset, spoke to her spirit as they had never done of old. And even so on their rides would she speak to Swift, who listened grimly, hardly daring to answer her for the fear of saying at the wrong moment what he had resolved to say once and for all before she went.

And he chose the wrong moment after all.

It was the eve of her going, and they were riding together for the last time; he felt that it was also his last opportunity. So in six miles he made as many remarks; then turned in his saddle and spoke out with overpowering fervour. This may be expected of the self-contained suitor, with whom it is only a question of time, and the longer the time the stronger the outburst. But Christina was not carried away, for she did not quite love him, and the opportunity was a bad one, and Swift's honest method had not improved it. She listened kindly, with her eyes on the distant timbers of the eight-mile whim; but her kindness was fatally calm: and when he waited, she refused him firmly. She confessed to a fondness for him. She ascribed this to the years they had known each other. Once and for all, she did not love him.

“Not now!” exclaimed the young fellow, eagerly. “But you did once! You will again!”

"I never loved you," said the girl gravely. "If you're thinking of two years ago, that was mere nonsense. I don't believe it's love with you either, if you only knew it."

"But I do know what it is with me, Tiny ! I loved you before you went away, and all the time you were gone. Since you have been back, during these few days, I have got to love you more than ever. And so I shall go on, whatever happens. I can't help it, darling."

Neither could he help saying this ; for the hour found him unable to accept his fate quite as he had meant to accept it. Her kindness had something to do with that. And now she spoke more kindly than before.

"Are you sure ?" she said.

"Am I sure !" he echoed bitterly.

"It is so easy to deceive oneself."

"I am not deceived."

"It is so easy to imagine yourself——"

"I am not imagining !" cried Swift im-

patiently. "I am the man who has loved you always, and never any girl but you. If you can't believe that, you must have had a very poor experience of men, Tiny!"

For a moment she looked away from the whim, which they were slowly nearing, and her eyes met his.

"I have," she admitted frankly; "I have had a particularly poor experience of them. Yet I am sorry to find you so different from the rest; I can't tell you how sorry I am to find you true to me."

"Sorry?" he said tenderly; for her voice was full of pain, and he could not bear that. "Why should you be sorry, dear?"

"Why—because I never dreamt of being true to you."

For some reason her face flamed as he watched it. There was a pause. Then he said—

"You are not engaged; are you in love?"

"Very far from it."

“Then why mind? If there is no one else you care for, you shall care for me yet. I’ll make you. I’ll wait for you. You don’t know me! I won’t give you up until you are some other fellow’s wife.”

His stern eyes, the way his mouth shut on the words, and the manly determination of the words themselves gave the girl a thrill of pleasure and of pride; but also a pang: for at that moment she felt the wish to love him alongside the inability, and all at once she was as sorry for herself as for him.

“Why should you mind?” repeated Swift.

“I can’t tell you, but you can guess what I have been.”

“A flirt?” He laughed aloud. “Darling, I don’t care two figs for your flirtations! I wanted you to enjoy yourself. What does it matter how you’ve enjoyed yourself, so long as you haven’t absolutely been getting engaged or falling in love?”

Her chin drooped into her loose white blouse. "I did fall in love," she said, slowly—"at any rate I thought so; and I very nearly got engaged."

Swift had never seen so much colour in her face.

Presently he said, "What happened?" but immediately added, "I beg your pardon; of course, I have no business to ask." His tone was more stiff than strained.

"You *have* business," she answered eagerly, fearful of making him less than friend. "I wouldn't mind telling you the whole thing, except the man's name. And yet," she added rather wistfully, "I suppose you're the only friend I have that doesn't know! It's hard lines to have to tell you."

"Then I don't want to know anything at all about it," exclaimed Swift impulsively. "I would rather you didn't tell me a word, if you don't mind. I am only too thankful to think you got out of it, whatever it was."

“ I didn’t get out of it.”

“ You don’t—mean—that the man did ? ”

Swift was aghast.

“ I do.”

He did not speak, but she heard him breathing. Stealing a look at him, her eyes fell first upon the clenched fist lying on his knee.

She made haste to defend the man.

“ It wasn’t all his fault ; of that I feel sure. If you knew who he was you wouldn’t blame him any more than I do. He was quite a boy, too ; I don’t suppose he was a free agent. In any case it is all quite, quite over.”

“ Is it ? He was from England—that’s why you hate the Home people so ! ”

“ Yes, he was from Home. He went back very suddenly. It wasn’t his fault. He was sent for. But he might have said good-bye ! ”

She spoke reflectively, gazing once more at the whim. They were near it now. The framework cut the sky like some uncouth hieroglyph.

To Swift henceforward, on all his lonely journeys hither, it was the emblem of humiliation. But it was not his own humiliation that moistened his clenched hand now.

“I wish I had him here,” he muttered.

“Ah! you know nothing about him, you see; I know enough to forgive him. And I have got over it, quite; but the worst of it is that I can’t believe any more in any of you—I simply can’t.”

“Not in me?” asked Swift warmly, for her belief in him, at least, he knew he deserved. “I have always been the same. I have never thought of any other girl but you, and I never will. I love you, darling!”

“After this, Jack?”

He seemed to disappoint her.

“After the same thing if it happens all over again in England! There is no merit in it: I simply can’t help myself. While you are away I will wait for you and work for you; only come

back free, and I will win you, too, in the end. You are happier here than anywhere else, but you don't know what it is to be really happy as I should make you. Remember that—and this: that I will never give you up until someone else has got you! Now call me conceited or anything you like. I have done bothering you."

"I can only call you foolish," said the girl, though gently. "You are far too good for me. As for conceit, you haven't enough of it, or you would never give me another thought. I still hope you will quite give up thinking about me, and—and try to get over it. But nothing is going to happen in England, I can promise you that much. And I only wish I could get out of going."

He had already shown her how she might get out of it; he was not going to show her afresh or more explicitly, in spite of the temptation to do so. Even to a proud spirit it is difficult to take No when the voice that says it is kind

and sorrowful and all but loving. Swift found it easier to bide by his own statement that he had done bothering her ; such was his pride.

But he had chosen the wrong moment, and though he had shown less pride than he had meant to show, he was still too proud to improve the right one when it came. He was too proud, indeed, to stand much chance of immediate success in love. Otherwise he might have reminded her with more force and particularity of their former relations ; and playing like that he might have won, but he would rather have lost. Perhaps he did not recognise the right moment as such when it fell ; but at least he must have seen that it was better than the one he had chosen. It fell in the evening, when Christina's mood became conspicuously sentimental ; but Swift happened to be one of the last young men in the world to take advantage of any mere mood.

As on the first evening, Mr. Luttrell was busy in the store, but this time with the store-

keeper, who was making out a list of things to be sent up in the drays from Melbourne. Tiny and the manager were thrown together for the last time. She offered to sing a song, and he thanked her gratefully enough. But he listened to her plaintive songs from a far corner of the room, though the room was lighted only by the moonbeams; and when she rose he declared that she was tired and begged her not to sing any more. She could have beaten him for that.

But in leaving the room they lingered on the threshold, being struck by the beauty of the night. The full moon ribbed the station yard with the shadows of the pines, a soft light was burning in the store, and all was so still that the champing of the night-horse in the yard came plainly to their ears, with the chirping of the everlasting crickets. Christina raised her face to Swift; her eyes were wet in the moonlight; there was even a slight tremor of the red lips; and one hand hung down invitingly at her side.

She did not love him, but she was beginning to wish that she could love him ; and she did love the place. Had he taken that one hand then, the chances are he might have kept it. But even Swift never dreamt that this was so. And after that moment it was not so any more. She turned cold, and was cold to the end. Her last words from the top of the coach fell as harshly on a loving ear as any that had preceded them by a week.

“ Why need you remind me I am going to England ? Enjoy myself ! I shall detest the whole thing.”

Her last look matched the words.

CHAPTER III.

THE TAIL OF THE SEASON.

“WHAT do you say to sitting it out? The rooms are most awfully crowded, and you dance too well for one; besides, one’s anxious to hear your impressions of a London ball.”

“One must wait till the ball is over. So far I can’t deny that I’m enjoying myself, in spite of the crush. But I should rather like to sit out for once, though you needn’t be sarcastic about my dancing.”

“Well then, where’s a good place?”

“There’s a famous corner in the conservatory; it should be empty now that a dance is just beginning.”

It was. So it became occupied next moment by Tiny Luttrell and her partner, who allowed

that the dimly-illuminated recess among the tree-ferns deserved its fame. Tiny's partner, however, was only her brother-in-law, Mr. Erskine Holland.

The Luttrells had been exactly a fortnight in England. It was in the earliest hour of the month of July that Christina sat out with her brother-in-law at her first London party; and if she had spent that fortnight chiefly in visiting dressmakers and waiting for results, she had at least found time to get to know Erskine Holland very much better than she had ever done in Melbourne. There she had seen very little of him, partly through being away from home when he first called with an introduction to the family, but more by reason of the short hurdle-race he had made of his courtship, marriage, and return to England with his bride. He had taken the matrimonial fences as only an old bachelor can who has been given up as such by his friends. Mr. Holland, though still nearer thirty

than forty, had been regarded as a confirmed bachelor when starting on a long sea voyage for the restoration of his health after an autumnal typhoid. His friends were soon to know what weakened health and Australian women can do between them. They beheld their bachelor return within four months, a comfortably married man, with a pleasant little wife who was very fond of him, and in no way jealous of his old friends. That was Mrs. Erskine's great merit, and the secret of the signal success with which she presided over his table in West Kensington, when Erskine had settled down there and returned with steadiness to the good safe business to which he had been virtually born a partner. For his part, without being enslaved to a degree embarrassing to their friends, Holland made an obviously satisfactory husband. He was good-natured and never exacting; he was well-off and generous. One of a wealthy many-membered firm driving a versatile trade in the

East, he was as free personally from business anxieties as was the hall-porter at the firm's offices in Lombard Street. There Erskine was the most popular and least useful fraction of the firm, being just a big, fair, genial fellow, fond of laughter and chaff and lawn-tennis, and fonder of books than of the newspapers—an eccentric preference in a business man. But as a business man the older partners shook their heads about him. Once as a youngster he had spent a year or two in Lisbon, learning the language and the ropes there, the firm having certain minor interests planted in Portuguese soil on both sides of the Indian Ocean; and those interests just suited Erskine Holland, who had the handling of them, though the older partners nursed their own distrust of a man who boasted of taking his work out of his head each evening when he hung up his office coat. At home, Erskine was a man who read more than one guessed, and had his own ideas on a good many subjects.

He found his sister-in-law lamentably ignorant, but quite eager to improve her mind at his direction ; and this is ever delightful to the man who reads. Also he found her amusing, and that experience was mutual.

A Londoner himself, with many reputable relatives in the town who rejoiced in the bachelor's marriage and were able to like his wife, he was in a position to gratify to a considerable extent Mrs. Erskine's social desires. That he did so somewhat against his own inclination (much as in Melbourne his father-in-law had done before him) was due to an acutely fair mind allied with a thoroughly kind and sympathetic nature. His own attitude towards society was not free from that slight intellectual superiority which some of the best fellows in the world cannot help ; but at least it was perfectly genuine. He treated society as he treated champagne, which he seldom touched, but about which he was curiously fastidious on those chance

occasions. He cared as little for the one as for the other, but found the drier brands inoffensive in both cases. The ball to-night was at Lady Almeric's.

"Not a bad corner," Erskine said, as he made himself comfortable; "but I'm afraid it's rather thrown away upon me, you know."

"Far from it. I wish I had been dancing with you the whole evening, Erskine," said Christina seriously.

"That's rather obsequious of you. May I ask why?"

"Because I don't think much of my partners so far, to talk to."

"Ha! I knew there was something you wouldn't think much of," cried Erskine Holland. "Have they nothing to say for themselves, then?"

"Oh, plenty. They discover where I come from; then they show their ignorance. They want to know if there is any chance for a fellow

on the gold-fields now; they have heard of a place called Ballarat, but they aren't certain whether it's a part of Melbourne or nearer Sydney. One man knows some people at Hobart Town, in New Zealand, he fancies. I never knew anything like their ignorance of the Colonies!"

Mr. Holland tugged a smile out of his moustache. "Can you tell me how to address a letter to Montreal—is it Quebec or Ontario?" he asked her, as if interested and anxious to learn.

"Goodness knows," replied Christina innocently.

"Then that's rather like their ignorance of the Colonies, isn't it? There's not much difference between a group of Colonies and a Dominion, you see. I'm afraid your partners are not the only people whose geography has been sadly neglected."

Christina laughed.

"My education's been neglected altogether,

if it comes to that. As you're taking me in hand, perhaps you'll lend me a geography as well as Ruskin and Thackeray. Nevertheless Australia's more important than Canada, you may say what you like, Erskine; and your being smart won't improve my partners."

"Oh! but I thought it was only their conversation?"

"You force me to tell you that their idea of dancing seems limited to pushing you up one side of the room and dragging you after them down the other. Sometimes they turn you round. Then they're proud of themselves. They never do it twice running."

"That's because there are so many here."

"There are far too many here—that's what's the matter! And I'm a nice person to tell you so," added Tiny penitently, "when it's you and Ruth who have brought me here. But you know I don't mean that I'm not enjoying it, Erskine; I'm enjoying it immensely, and I'm

very proud of myself for being here at all. I can't quite explain myself—I don't much like trying to—but there's a something about everything that makes it seem better than anything of the kind that we can do in Melbourne. The music is so splendid, and the floor, and the flowers. I never saw such a few diamonds—or such beauties! Even the ices are the best I ever tasted, and they aren't too sweet. There's something subdued and superior about the whole concern; but it's too subdued; it needs go and swing nearly as badly as it needs elbow-room—of more kinds than one! I'm thinking less of the crowd of people than of their etiquette and ceremony, which hamper you far more. But it's your old England in a nutshell, this ball is: it fits too tight!”

“Upon my word,” said Erskine, laughing, “I don't think it's at all bad for you to find the old country a tight fit! I'm obliged to you for the expression, Tiny. I only hope it isn't suggested

by personal suffering. I have been thinking that you must have a good word to say for our dressmakers, if not for our dancing men."

Christina slid her eyes over the snow and ice of the shimmering attire that had been made for her in haste since her arrival.

"I'm glad you like me," she said, smiling honestly. "I must own I rather like myself in this lot. I didn't want to disgrace you among your fine friends, you see."

"They're more fine than friends, my dear girl. Lady Almeric's the only friend. She has been very nice to Ruth. Most of the people here are rather classy, I can assure you."

He named the flower of the company in a lowered voice. Christina knew one of the names.

"Lady Mary Dromard, did you say?" said she, playing idly with her fan.

"Yes; do you know her?"

"No, but her brother was in Melbourne

once as aide-de-camp to the Governor. I knew him."

"Ah, that was Lord Manister; he wasn't out there when I was."

"No, he must have come just after you had gone. He only remained a few months, you know. He was a quiet young man with a mania for cricket; we liked him because he set our young men their fashions and yet never gave himself airs. I wonder if he's here as well?"

"I don't think so. I know him by sight, but I haven't seen him. I'm glad to hear he didn't give himself airs; you couldn't say the same for the sister, who is here, though I only know her by sight, too."

"He was quite a nice young man," said Christina, shutting up her fan; and, as she spoke, the music, whose strains had reached them all the time, came to its natural end.

The conservatory suffered instant invasion, Christina and Mr. Holland being afforded the

entertainment of disappointing couple after couple who came straight to their corner. "We're in a coveted spot," whispered Erskine; and his sister-in-law reminded him who had shown the way to it. It was less secluded than remote, so the present occupiers found further entertainment as mere spectators. The same little things amused them both; this was one reason why they got on so well together. They were amused by such trifles as a distant prospect of Ruth, who was innocently enjoying herself at the other end of the conservatory, unaware of their eyes. Erskine might have felt proud, and no doubt he did, for many people considered Ruth even prettier than Christina, with whom, however, they were apt to confuse her, though Holland himself could never see the likeness. He now sat watching his wife in the distance while talking to her sister at his side until a new partner pounced upon Ruth, and bore her away as the music began afresh.

"There goes my chaperon," remarked Christina resignedly.

"Who's your partner now? I'm sorry to say I see mine within ten yards of me," whispered Erskine, in some anxiety.

Tiny consulted her card. "It's Herbert," she said.

"Herbert!" said Mr. Holland dubiously. "I'm afraid Herbert's going it; he's deeply employed with a girl in red—I think an American. Shall I take you to Lady Almeric?" His eyes shifted uneasily towards his expectant partner.

"No, I'll wait here for Herbert. Mayn't I? Then I'm going to. You're sure to see him, and you can send him at once. Don't blame Ruth. What does it matter? It will matter if you don't go this instant to your partner; I see it in her eye!"

He left her reluctantly, with the undertaking that Herbert should be at her side in

two minutes. But that was rash. Christina soon had the conservatory entirely to herself, whereupon she came out of her corner, so that her brother might find her the more readily. Still he kept her waiting, and she might as well have been lonely in the corner. It was too bad of Herbert to leave her standing there, where she had no business to be by herself, and the music and the throbbing floor within a few yards of her. These awkward minutes naturally began to disturb her. They checked and cooled her in the full blast of healthy excitement, and that was bad; they threw her back upon herself straight from her lightest mood, and this was worse. She became abnormally aware of her own presence as she stood looking down and impatiently tapping with her little white slipper upon the marble flags. Even about these there was the grand air which Christina relished; she might have seen her face far below, as though she had been standing in still water; but her

thoughts had been given a rough jerk inward, her outward vision fell no deeper than the polished surface, while her mind's eye saw all at once the dusty verandah boards of Wallandoon. She stood very still, and the music died away in her ears, and through three months of travel and great changes she heard again the night-horse champing in the yard, and the crickets chirping further afield. And as she stood, her head bowed by this sudden memory, footsteps approached, and she looked up, expecting to see Herbert. But it was not Herbert; it was a young man of more visible distinction than Herbert Luttrell. It is difficult to look better dressed than another in our evening mode; but this young man overcame the difficulty. He stood erect; he was well built; his clothes fitted beautifully; he was himself nice-looking, and fair-haired, and boyish; and, even more than his clothes, one admired his smile, which was frank and delightful. But the smile he gave Christina

was followed by a blush, for she had held out her hand to him, and asked him how he was.

“I’m all right, thanks. But—this is the most extraordinary thing! Been over long?”

He had dropped her hand.

“About a fortnight,” said Christina.

“But what a pity to come over so late in the season! It’s about done, you know.”

“Yes? I thought there was a good deal going on still.”

“There’s Henley, to be sure.”

“I think I’m going to Henley.”

“Going to the Eton and Harrow?”

“I am not quite sure. That was your match, wasn’t it?”

The young man blushed afresh.

“Fancy your remembering! Unfortunately, it wasn’t my match, though; my day out was against Winchester.”

“Oh, yes,” said Tiny, less knowingly.

“And how are you, Miss Luttrell?”

This had been forgotten. Tiny reported well of herself. Her friend hesitated; there was some nervousness in his manner, but his good eyes never fell from her face, and presently he exclaimed, as though the idea had just struck him—

“I say, mayn’t I have this dance, Miss Luttrell—what’s left of it?”

“Thanks, I’m afraid I’m engaged for it.”

“Then mayn’t I find your partner for you?”

Now this second request, or his anxious way of making it, was an elaborate revelation to Christina, and wrote itself in her brain. “Do you remember Herbert?” she, however, simply replied. “He is the culprit.”

“Your brother? Certainly I remember him. I saw him a few minutes ago, and made sure I had seen him somewhere before; but he looks older. I don’t fancy he’s dancing. He’s somewhere or other with somebody in red.”

“So I hear.”

“Then mayn’t I have a turn with you before it stops?”

She hesitated as long as he had hesitated before first asking her; there was not time to hesitate longer. Then she took his arm, and they passed through a narrow avenue of ferns and flowers, round a corner, up some steps, and so into the ball-room.

The waltz was indeed half over, but the second half of it Christina and her fortuitous partner danced together, without a rest, and also without a word. He led her a more enterprising measure than those previous partners who had questioned her concerning Australia. The name of Australia had not crossed this one’s lips. As Tiny whirled and glided on his arm, she saw a good many eyes upon her; they made her dance her best; and her best was the best in the room, though her partner was uncommonly good, and they had danced together before. Among the eyes were Ruth’s, and they were beaming; the

others were mostly inquisitive, and as strange to Christina as she evidently was to them ; but once a turn brought her face to face with Herbert, on his way from the conservatory, and alone. He was a lanky, brown-faced, hook-nosed young fellow, with wiry limbs and an aggressive eye, and he followed his sister round the room with a stare of which she was uncomfortably conscious. He had looked for her too late, when forced to relinquish the girl in red to her proper partner, who still seemed put out. Christina was put out also, by her brother's look, but she did not show it.

“ You are staying in town ? ” her partner said after the dance, as they sat together in the conservatory, but not in the old corner.

“ Yes, with my sister, Mrs. Holland ; you never met her, I think. We are in town till August.”

“ Where do you go then ? ”

“ To the country for a month. My sister

and her husband have taken a country rectory for the whole of August. They had it last year, and liked the place so much that they have taken it again; it is a little village called Essingham."

"Essingham!" cried Christina's partner.

"Yes; do you know it?"

"I know of it," answered the young man.

"I suppose you will go on the Continent after that?" he added quickly.

"Well, hardly; my brother-in-law has so little time; but he expects to have to go to Lisbon on business at the end of October, and he has promised to take us with him."

"To Lisbon at the end of October," repeated Tiny's friend reflectively. "Get him to take you to Cintra. They say it's well worth seeing."

Yet another dance was beginning. Christina was interested in the movements of a young man in spectacles, who was plainly in search of somebody. "He's hunting for me," she whispered to her companion, who was saying—

“Portugal’s rather the knuckle-end of Europe, don’t you think? But I’ve heard Cintra well spoken of. I should go there if I were you.”

“We intend to. Do you mind pulling that young man’s coat-tails? He has forgotten my face.”

“Yes, I do mind,” said Tiny’s partner, with unexpected earnestness. “I may meet you again, but I should like to take this opportunity of explaining——”

Tiny Luttrell was smiling in his face.

“I hate explanations!” she cried. “They are an insult to one’s imagination, and I much prefer to accept things without them.” There was a gleam in her smile, but as she spoke she flashed it upon the spectacles of her blind pursuer, who was squaring his arm to her in an instant.

And that was the last she saw of the only partner for whom she had a good word after-

wards, and he had come to her by accident. But it was by no means the last she heard of him. The next was from Herbert, as they drove home together in one hansom, while Ruth and her husband followed in another. The morning air blew fresh upon their faces; the rising sun struck sparks from the harness; the leaves in the park were greener than any in Australia, and the dew on the grass through the railings was as a silver shower new-fallen. But the most delicious taste of London that had yet been given her was poisoned for Christina by her brother Herbert.

“To have my claim jumped by that joker!” said he through his nose.

“But you had left it empty,” said Tiny mildly; “I was all alone.”

“It isn’t so much that,” her brother said, shifting the ground he had taken in preliminary charges; “it’s your dancing with that brute Manister!”

“My dear old Herbs,” said Miss Luttrell, with provoking coolness, “Lord Manister asked me to dance with him, and I didn’t see why I should refuse. I certainly didn’t see why I should consult you, Herbs.”

“By ghost,” cried Herbert, “if it comes to that, he once asked you to marry him !”

“Now you are a treat,” said the girl, before the blood came.

“And then bolted ! I should be ashamed of myself for dancing with him if I were you. He said I was a larrikin, too. I’d like to fill his eye for him !”

“He’ll never say a truer thing !” Christina cried out ; but her voice broke over the words, and the early sun cut diamonds on her lashes.

Now this was Herbert : he was rough, but not cowardly. His nose had become hooked in his teens, from a stand-up fight with a full-grown man. There is not the least doubt that in such a combat with Lord Manister, that nobleman,

though otherwise a finer athlete, would have suffered extremely. But it was not in Herbert to hit any woman in cold blood with his tongue. Having done this in his heat to Christina, his mate, he was man enough to be sorry and ashamed, and to slip her hands into his.

“I’m an awful beast,” he stammered out. “I didn’t mean anything at all—except that I’d like to fill up Manister’s eye! I can’t go back on that when—when he called me a larrikin.”

CHAPTER IV.

RUTH AND CHRISTINA.

HERE is the difference between Ruth and Christina, who were considered so much alike.

Of the two, Ruth was the one to fall in love with at sight—of which Erskine Holland supplies the proof. She was less diminutive than her sister, she had a finer figure, a warmer colour, and indeed, despite the destructive Australian sun, a very beautiful complexion. In the early days at Wallandoon she had given herself a better chance in this respect than Christina had done, not from vanity at all, but rather owing to certain differences in their ideas of pleasure, into which it is needless to enter. The result was her complexion; and this was

not her only beauty, for she had good brown eyes that suited her colouring, as autumn leaves befit an autumn sunset. These eyes are never unkind, but Ruth's were sweet-tempered to a fault. So the glance of one scanning both girls for the first time rested naturally upon Ruth, but on all subsequent occasions it flew straight to Christina, because there was an end to Ruth; but there was no coming to an end of Tiny, about whom there was ever some fresh thing to charm or disappoint one.

Thus, but for the business-like despatch of Erskine Holland, it might have been Ruth's fate to break in Christina's admirers until Christina fancied one of them enough to marry him. For Ruth's was perhaps the more unselfish character of the two, as it was certainly the simpler one, in spite of a peculiar secretive strain in her from which Tiny was free. Tiny, on the other hand, was much more sensitive; but to perceive this was to understand her better than she understood

herself. For she did not know her own weaknesses as the self-examining know theirs, and hardly anybody suspected her of this one until her arrival in England : when Erskine Holland came to treat her as a sister, and to understand her more or less.

In Australia he had seen very little of her, though enough to regard her at the time as an arrant little heartless flirt, for whom sighed silly swains innumerable. That she was indeed a flirt there was still no denying ; but, as his knowledge of her ripened, Holland was glad to unharness the opprobrious epithets with which Ruth's sister had first driven herself into his mind. He discovered good points in Christina, and among them a humour which he had never detected out in Australia. Probably his own sense of it had lost its edge out there, for love-making blunts nothing sooner ; while Ruth, for her part, was naturally wanting in humour. Holland had never been blind to this defect in his wife, but he

seemed resigned to it; one can conceive it to be a merit in the wife of an amusing man.

Some people called Erskine amusing—it is not hard to win this label from some people—but at any rate he was never likely to find it difficult to amuse Ruth. Now no companion in this world is more charming for all time than the person who is content to do the laughing. As a novelty, however, Christina had her own distinctive attraction for Erskine Holland. And they got on so well together that presently he saw more in Tiny than her humour, which others had seen before him: he saw that her heart was softer than she thought; but he divined that something had happened to harden it.

“She has been falling in love,” he said to Ruth—“and something has happened.”

“What makes you think so? She has told me nothing about it,” Ruth said.

“Ah, she is sensitive. I can see that, too.

It's her bitterness, however, that makes me think something has turned out badly."

"She is sadly cynical," remarked Ruth.

"Cynically sad, I rather think," her husband said. "I don't fancy she's languishing now; I should say she has got over the thing, whatever it has been—and is rather disappointed with herself for getting over it so easily. She has hinted at nothing, but she has a trick of generalising; and she affects to think that one person doesn't fret for another longer than a week in real life. I don't say her cynicism is so much affectation; something or other has left a bad taste in her mouth; but I should like to bet that it wasn't an affair of the most serious sort."

"Her affairs never were very serious, Erskine."

"So I gathered from what I saw of her before we were married. It's a pity," said Erskine musingly. "I'd like to see her married, but I'd love to see her wooed!

That's where the sport would come in. There would be no knowing where the fellow had her. He might hook her by luck, but he'd have to play her like fun before he landed her! There'd be a strong sporting interest in the whole thing, and that's what one likes."

"It's a pity I didn't know what you liked," Ruth said, with a smile; "and a wonder that you liked me, and not Tiny!"

"My darling," laughed her husband, "that sort of sport's for the young fellows. I'm past it. I merely meant that I should like to see the sport. No, Tiny's charming in her way, but God forbid that it should be your way too!"

Now Ruth was such a fond little wife that at this speech she became too much gratified on her own account to care to discuss her sister any further. But in dismissing the subject of Tiny she took occasion to impress one fact upon Erskine—

"You may be right, dear, and something may

have happened since I left home ; but I can only tell you that Tiny hasn't breathed a single word about it to me."

And this is an early sample of the disingenuous streak that was in the very grain of Ruth. Christina, indeed, had told her nothing, but Ruth knew nearly all that there was to know of the affair whose traces were plain to her husband's insight. Beyond the fact that the name of Tiny Luttrell had been coupled in Melbourne with that of Lord Manister, and the *on dit* that Lord Manister had treated her rather badly, there was, indeed, very little to be known. But Ruth knew at least as much as her mother, who had written to her on the subject the more freely and frequently because her younger daughter flatly refused the poor lady her confidence. There was no harm in Ruth's not showing those letters to her husband. There was no harm in her keeping her sister's private affairs from her husband's knowledge. There was the reverse of

harm in both reservations, as Erskine would have been the first to allow. Ruth had her reasons for making them ; and if her reasons embodied a deep design, there was no harm in that either, for surely it is permissible to plot and scheme for the happiness of another. I can see no harm in her conduct from any point of view. But it was certainly disingenuous, and it entailed an insincere attitude towards two people, which in itself was not admirable. And those two were her nearest. However amiable her plans might be, they made it impossible for Ruth to be perfectly sincere with her husband on one subject, which was bad enough. But with Christina it was still more impossible to be at all candid ; and this happened to be worse, for reasons which will be recognised later. In the first place, Tiny immediately discovered Ruth's insincerity, and even her plans. Tiny was a difficult person to deceive. She detected the insincerity in a single conversation with Ruth on the afternoon

following Lady Almeric's ball, and before she went to bed she was as much in possession of the plans as if Ruth had told her them.

The conversation took place in Erskine's study, where the sisters had foregathered for a lazy afternoon.

"Oh, by the way," said Ruth, *à propos* of the ball, "it was a coincidence your dancing with Lord Manister."

"Why a coincidence?" asked Christina. She glanced rather sharply at Ruth as she put the question.

"Well, it is just possible that we shall see something of him in the country. That's all," said Ruth, as she bent over the novel of which she was cutting the pages.

Christina also had a book in her lap, but she had not opened it; she was trying to read Ruth's averted face.

"I thought perhaps you meant because we saw something of him in Melbourne," she said

presently. "I suppose you know that we did see something of him? He even honoured us, once or twice."

"So you told me in your letters."

The paper-knife was still at work.

"What makes it likely that we shall see him in the country?"

"Well, Mundham Hall is quite close to Essingham, you know."

"Mundham Hall! Whose place is that?"

"Lord Dromard's," replied Ruth, still intent upon her work.

"Surely not!" exclaimed Christina. "Lord Manister once told me the name of their place, and I am convinced it wasn't that."

"They have several places. But until quite lately they have lived mostly at the other side of the county, at Wreford Abbey."

"That was the name."

"But they have sold that place," said Ruth, "and last autumn Lord Dromard bought

Mundham; it was empty when we were at Essingham last year."

For some moments there was silence, broken only by the leisurely swish of Ruth's paper-knife. Then Christina said, "That accounts for it," thinking aloud.

"For what?" asked Ruth, rather nervously.

"Lord Manister told me he knew of Essingham. He never mentioned Mundham. Is it so very close to your rectory?"

"The grounds are; they are very big; the hall itself is miles from the gates—almost as far as our home-station was from the boundary fence."

"Surely not," Tiny said quietly.

"Well, that's a little exaggeration, of course."

"Then I wish it wasn't!" Tiny cried out. "I don't relish the idea of living under the lee of such very fine people," she said next moment, as quietly as before.

“No more do I—no more does Erskine,” Ruth made haste to declare. “But we enjoyed ourselves so much there last August that we said at the time that we would take the rectory again this August. We made the people promise us the refusal. And it seemed absurd to refuse just because Lord Dromard had bought Mundham ; shouldn’t you have said so yourself, dear?”

“Certainly I should,” answered Tiny ; and for half an hour no more was said.

The afternoon was wet ; there was no inducement to go out, even with the necessary energy, and the two young women, on whose pillows the sun had lain before their faces, felt anything but energetic. The afternoon was also cold to Australian blood, and a fire had been lighted in Erskine’s den. His favourite armchair contained several cushions and Christina (who might as well have worn his boots), while Ruth, having cut all the leaves of her volume, curled herself up on the sofa with an obvious intention. She

was good at cutting the leaves of a new book, but still better at going to sleep over them when cut. She had read even less than Christina, and it troubled her less; but this afternoon she read more. Ruth could not sleep. No more could Tiny. But Tiny had not opened her book. It was one of the good books that Erskine had lent her. She was extremely interested in it; but just at present her own affairs interested her more. Lying back in the big chair, with the wet grey light behind her, and that of the fire playing fitfully over her face, Christina committed what was as yet an unusual weakness for her, by giving way voluntarily to her thoughts. She was in the habit of thinking as little as possible, because so many of her thoughts were depressing company, and beyond all things she disliked being depressed. This afternoon she was less depressed than indignant. The fire-light showed her forehead strung with furrows. From time to time she turned her eyes to the

sofa, as if to make sure that Ruth was still awake, and as often as they rested there they gleamed. At last she spoke Ruth's name.

"Well?" said Ruth. "I thought you were asleep; you have never stirred."

"I'm not sleepy, thanks; and, if you don't mind, I should like to speak to you before you drop off yourself."

Ruth closed her novel.

"What is it, dear? I'm listening."

"When you wrote and invited me over, you mentioned Essingham as one of the attractions. Now why couldn't you tell me the Dromards would be our neighbours there?"

Ruth raised her eyes from the younger girl's face to the rain-spattered window. Tiny's tone was cold, but not so cold as Tiny's searching glance. This made Ruth uncomfortable. It did not incapacitate her, however.

"The Dromards!" she exclaimed, rather well. "Had they taken the place then?"

“ You say they bought it before Christmas ; it was after Christmas that you first wrote and expressly invited me.”

“ Was it ? Well, my dear, I suppose I never thought of them ; that’s all. They aren’t the only nice people thereabouts.”

“ I’m afraid you are not quite frank with me,” the young girl said ; and her own frankness was a little painful.

“ Tiny, dear, what a thing to say ! What does it mean ? ”

Ruth employed for these words the injured tone.

“ It means that you know as well as I do, Ruth, that it isn’t pleasant for me to meet Lord Manister.”

“ Was there something between you in Melbourne ? ” asked Ruth. “ I must say that nobody would have thought so from seeing you together last night. And—and how was I to think so, when you have never told me anything about it ? ”

Christina laughed bitterly.

“When you have made a fool of yourself you don’t go out of your way to talk about it, even to your own people. It is kind of you to pretend to know nothing about it—I am sure you mean it kindly; but I’m still surer that you have been told all there was to tell concerning Lord Manister and me. I don’t mean by Herbert. He’s close. But the mother must have written and told you something; it was only natural that she should do so.”

“She did tell me a little. Herbert has told me nothing. I tried to pump him—I think you can’t wonder at that—but he refused to speak a word on the subject. He says he hates it.”

“He hates Lord Manister,” said Christina, smiling. “It came round to him once that Lord Manister had called him a larrikin, and he has never forgiven him. But he has been less of a larrikin ever since. And, of course, that wasn’t why he was so angry with me for

dancing with Lord Manister last night : he was dreadfully angry with me as we drove home ; but he is a very good boy to me, and there was something in what he said."

"What made you dance with him?" Ruth said curiously.

"I was alone. I hadn't a partner. He asked me rather prettily—he always had pretty manners. You wouldn't have had me show him I cared, by snubbing him, would you?"

"No," said Ruth thoughtfully ; and suddenly she slipped from the sofa, and was kneeling on the hearthrug, with her brown eyes softly searching Christina's face and her lips whispering, "Do you care, Tiny? *Do* you care, Tiny, dear?"

Tiny snapped her fingers as she pushed back her chair.

"Not that much for anybody—much less for Lord Manister, and least of all for myself! Now don't you be too good to me, Ruth; if you are, you'll only make me feel ungrateful,

and I shall run away, because I'm not going to tell you another word about what's over and done with. I can't! I have got over the whole thing, but it has been a sickener. It makes me sick to think about it. I don't want ever to speak of it again."

"I understand," said Ruth; but there was disappointment in her look and tone, and she added, "I should like to have heard the truth, though; and no one can tell it me but you."

"And thank Heaven for that!" cried Christina piously. "The version out there was that he proposed to me and I accepted him, and then he bolted without even saying good-bye. It's true that he didn't say good-bye; the rest is not true. But you must just make it do."

Her face was scarlet with the shame of it all; but there was no sign of weakness in the curling lips. She spoke bitterly, but not at all sadly, and her next words were still more suggestive of a wound to the vanity rather than to the heart.

“Does Erskine know?”

“Not a word.”

“Honestly?”

“Quite honestly; at least, I have never mentioned it to him, and I don’t think anybody else has, or he would have mentioned it to me.”

“Oh, Herbert wouldn’t say anything. Herbert’s very close. But—don’t you two tell each other everything, Ruth?”

The young girl looked incredulous; the married woman smiled.

“Hardly everything, you know! Erskine has lots of relations himself, for instance, and I’m sure he wouldn’t care to tell me the ins and outs of their private affairs, even if I cared to know them. It’s just the same about you and your affairs, don’t you see?”

“Except that he knows me so well,” Christina reflected aloud, with her eyes upon the fire. “If I had a husband,” she added impulsively, “I should like to tell him every mortal thing,

whether I wanted to or not ! And I should like not to want to, but to be made. But that's because I should like above all things to be bossed ! ”

“ You would take some bossing,” suggested Ruth.

“ That's the worst of it,” said Christina, with a little sigh, and then a laugh as she snatched her eyes from the fire. “ But I can't tell you how glad I am you haven't told Erskine. Never tell him, Ruth, for you don't know how I covet his good opinion. I like him, you know, dear, and I rather think he likes me—so far.”

“ Indeed he does,” cried Ruth, warmly ; and a good point in her character stood out through the genuine words. “ Nothing ever made me happier than to see you become such friends.”

“ He laughs at me a good deal,” Tiny remarked, doubtfully.

“ That's because you amuse him a good deal. I can't get him to laugh at me, my dear.”

“He would laugh,” said Christina, with her eyes on the fire again, “if you told him I had aspired to Lord Manister!”

“But I’m not going to tell him anything at all about it.” Ruth paused. “And, after all, the Dromards won’t take any notice of us in the country.” She paused again. “And we won’t speak of this any more, Tiny, if you don’t like.”

The shame had come back to Christina’s face as she bent it towards the fire. Twice she had made no answer to what was kindly meant and even kindlier said. But now she turned and kissed Ruth, saying, “Thank you, dear. I am afraid I don’t like. But you have been awfully good and sweet about it—as I shan’t forget.” And the fire lit their faces as they met, but the tear that had got upon Tiny’s cheek was not her own.

Ruth, you see, could be tender and sympathetic and genuine enough. But she could not be sensible and let well alone.

She did that night a very foolish thing : she brought up the subject again. Tempted she certainly was. Never since her arrival in England had Tiny seemed so near to her, or she to Tiny, as in the hours immediately following the chat between them in Erskine's study. But Christina stood further from Ruth than Ruth imagined ; she had not advanced, but retreated, before the glow of Ruth's sympathy. This was after the event, when some hours separated Christina from those emotional moments to which she had not contributed her share of the emotion, leaving the scene upon her mind in just perspective. She still could value Ruth's sweetness at the end of their talk, but her own suspicions, aroused at the outset, to be immediately killed by a little kindness, had come to life again, and were calling for an equal appreciation. The extent of Tiny's suspicions was very full, and the suspicions themselves were uncommonly shrewd and convincing. They made it a little hard to

return Ruth's smiles during the evening, and to kiss her when saying good-night, though Tiny did these things duly. She went up-stairs before her time, however, and not at all in the mood to be bothered any further about Lord Manister. Yet she behaved very patiently when Ruth came presently to her room and thus bothered her, being suddenly tempted beyond her strength. For Christina was discovered standing fully dressed under the gas-bracket, and frowning at a certain photograph on an orange-coloured mount, which she turned face downwards as Ruth entered. Whereupon Ruth, discerning the sign-manual of a Melbourne photographer, could not help saying slyly, "Who is it, Tiny?"

"A friend of mine," Tiny said, also slyly, but keeping the photograph itself turned provokingly to the floor.

"In Australia?"

"Er—it was taken out there."

"It's Lord Manister!"

“ Perhaps it is—perhaps it isn’t.”

“ Tiny,” said Ruth, with pathos, “ you might show me ! ”

But Tiny drummed vexatiously on the wrong side of the mount ; and here Ruth surely should have let the matter drop, instead of which—

“ You are very horrid,” she said, “ but I must just tell you something. I have heard things from Lady Almeric, who is very intimate with Lady Dromard, and I don’t believe *he* is so much to blame as you think him. I have heard it spoken about in society. But don’t look frightened. Your name has never been mentioned. I don’t think it has ever come out. Indeed, I know it hasn’t, for *I*, actually, have been asked the name of the girl Lord Manister was fond of in Melbourne—by Lady Almeric ! ”

“ And what did you say ? ”

“ What do you suppose ? I glory in that fib—I am honestly proud of it. But, dear, the point is, not that Lord Manister has never

mentioned your name, but that he can bear neither name nor sight of the girl he is expected to marry! Lady Almeric told me when—I couldn't help her."

"He is a nice young man, I must say!" remarked Christina grimly. "My fellow-victim has a title, no doubt?"

"Well, it's Miss Garth, and her father's Lord Acklam, so she's the Honourable," said Ruth gravely. (Tiny smiled at her gravity.) "But I've seen her, and—he can't like her! And oh! Tiny dear, they all say he left his heart in Australia, but his mother sent for him because she heard something—but not your name, dear—and he came. They say he is devoted to his mother; but this has come between them, and she's sorry she interfered, because after all he won't marry poor Miss Garth. I had it direct from Lady Almeric when she tried to get that out of me. But I lied like a trooper!" exclaimed poor Ruth.

“I’m grateful to you for that,” Christina said, not ungraciously—“but I must really be going to bed.”

With a last wistful glance at the orange-coloured card-board, Ruth took the hint. Christina turned away in time to avoid an embrace without showing her repugnance, because she had still some regard for Ruth’s good heart. But she had never experienced a more grateful riddance, and the look that followed Ruth to the threshold would have kept her company for some time had she turned there and caught one glimpse of it.

“Now I understand!” said Christina to the closed door. “I suppose I ought to love you for it, Ruth; but I don’t—no, I don’t!”

She turned the photograph face upward, and stared thoughtfully at it for some minutes longer; then she put it away.

CHAPTER V.

ESSINGHAM RECTORY.

ESSINGHAM RECTORY, which the Erskine Hollands had taken for the month of August, was a little old building with some picturesque points to console one for the tameness of the view from its windows. The surrounding country was perfectly flat but for Gallow Hill, and not at all green but for the glebe and the river-side meadows, while the only trees of any account were the rectory elms and those in the Mundham grounds. It is true that on Gallow Hill three wind-crippled beeches brandished their deformities against the sky, as they may do still; but the country around Essingham is no country for trees. It is the country for warrens and rabbits and roads without hedges. So it

struck Christina as more like the back-blocks than anything she had hoped to see in England, and pleased her more than anything she had seen. She showed her pleasure before they arrived at Essingham. She forgot to disparage the Old Country during the long drive from the county town; and that was notable. She had actually no stone to cast at the elaborate and impressive gates of Mundham Hall; apparently she was herself impressed. But opposite the gates they turned to the left, into a narrow road with hedges, from which you can see the rectory, and as Herbert put it afterwards—

“That’s what knocked our Tiny!”

For the girl’s first glimpse of the old house was over the hedge and far away above a brilliant sash of meadow green. The cream-coloured walls were aglow in the low late sunshine, what was to be seen of them, for they were half hidden by a creeper almost as old as themselves. The red-tiled, weather-beaten roof

was dark with age. Even at a distance one smelt rats in the wainscot within the stuccoed walls. Around the house, and towering above the tiles, the elms stood as still against the evening sky as the square church-tower but a little way to the right. To the right of that, but further away, rose Gallow Hill. Thereabouts the sun was sinking, but the clock on the near side of the church-tower had gilt hands, which marked the hour when Christina stood up in the fly and astonished her friends with her frank delight. It was a point against this young lady, on subsequent occasions when she did not forget to decry the Old Country, that at ten minutes past seven on the evening of the 1st of August she had given way to enthusiasm over a scene that was purely English and very ordinary in itself.

Not that her immediate appreciation of the place became modified on a closer acquaintance with it. At the end of the first clear day at

Essingham she informed the others that thus far she had not enjoyed herself so much since leaving Australia. Of course she had enjoyed herself in London. That did not count. London only compared itself with Melbourne, Christina did not care how favourably; but Essingham was for comparison with the place that was dearer to her than any other in the world. You will understand why all her appreciations were directly comparative. This is natural in the very young, and fortunately Tiny Luttrell was still very young in some respects. Blessed with observant eyes, and having at this time an irritable memory to keep her prejudices at attention, her mind soon became the scene of many curious and specific contests between England and Australia. In the match between Wallandoon and Essingham, the latter made a better fight than you would think against so strong an opponent. The rectory was homely and convenient in its old age, and Christina was

greatly charmed with her own room, because it was small ; and if the wall-paper was modern and conventional, and not to be read from the pillow in the early morning, it was almost as pleasant to lie and watch the elm-tops trembling against the sky. And if the sky was not really blue in England, the leaves in Australia were not really green, as Christina now knew. So there they were quits. But England and Essingham scored palpably in some things ; the kitchen garden was one. Christina had never seen such a kitchen garden ; she found it possible to spend half an hour there at any time, to her further contentment ; and there were other attractions on the premises, which were just as good in their way, while their way was often better for one.

For instance, there was a lawn-tennis court which satisfied the soul of Erskine, who played daily for its express refreshment. That was what brought him to Essingham. The neighbouring

clergy were always ready for a game. But they laughed at Erskine for being so keen; he would get up before breakfast to roll the court, which passed their understanding. Christina played also, by no means ill, and Herbert uncommonly well; but this player neither won nor lost very prettily. He was more amiable over the photography which he had taken up in partnership with Tiny; but his photographs were uncommonly bad. Yet this was another amusement in the country, where, however, Christina was most amused by the neighbours who called. These were friendly people, and they had all called on the Hollands the previous year. Half of them were clergymen, though the stranger who met them found this difficult to believe in some cases; the other half were the clergymen's wives. Very grand families apart, there is no other society round about Essingham. And what could man wish better? Even Christina found it impossible to disapprove

of the well-bred, easy-going, tennis-playing, unprofessional country clergy, as acquaintances and friends. But she did find fault with the rector of Essingham, as a rector, though she had never seen him, and though Ruth assured her that he was a dear old man.

“He may be a dear old man,” Miss Luttrell would allow, “but he’s a bad old rector! His flock don’t find him such a dear old man, either. They only see him once a week, in the pulpit; and then they can’t hear him!”

“Who has been telling you that, Tiny?” asked Ruth.

“You’ve been talking sedition in the village!” said Erskine Holland.

“Well, I’ve been making friends with two or three of the people, if that’s what you call talking sedition,” Tiny replied; “and I think your dear old rector neglects them shamefully. He does worse than that. There’s some fund or other for buying coals and blankets for the poor

of the parish ; and there's old Mrs. Clapperton. Mrs. Clapperton's a Roman Catholic ; so, if you please, she never gets her coals or blankets, and she's too proud to ask for them. That's a fact—and I tell you what, I'd like to expose your dear old man, Ruth ! As for the village, if it's a specimen of your English villages, let me tell you, Erskine, that it's leagues behind the average bush township. Why, they haven't even got a State school, but only a one-horse affair run by the rector ! And the schoolmaster's the most ignorant man in the village. I wonder you don't copy us, and go in for State schools ! ”

“ Copy us, and go in for State schools,” echoed Ruth with gentle mirth, as she sometimes would echo Tiny's remarks, and with a smile that travelled from Tiny to Erskine. But Erskine did not return the smile. His eyes rested shrewdly upon Christina, and Ruth feared from their expression that he thought the girl an utter fool ; but she was wrong.

Christina was not, if you like, an intellectual girl, but she was by no means a fool. Neither was her brother-in-law, who perceived this. Her comments on the books he lent her were sufficiently intelligent, and she pleased him in other ways too. He was glad, for instance, to see her interesting herself in the local peasants; he was particularly glad that she did not give this interest its head: though as a matter of fact it never pulled. Christina was not the girl for interests that gallop and have not legs. Not the least of her attractions, in the eyes of a male relative of middle age, was a certain solid sanity that showed through every crevice of her wayward nature. It was sanity of the cynical sort, which men appreciate most. And it was least apparent in her own actions, which is the weak point of the cynically sane.

“At all events, Tiny, you can’t find the country a tight fit, like London,” said Erskine, once, during the first few days. “Come, now!”

“No,” replied Tiny, thoughtfully, “I must own it doesn’t fit so tight. But it tickles! You mayn’t go here and you mayn’t go there; in Australia you may go anywhere you darn please. Excuse me, Erskine, but I feel this a good deal. Only this morning Ruth and I were blocked by a notice-board just outside the wicket at the far end of the churchyard; we were thinking of going up Gallow Hill, but we had to turn back, as trespassers would be prosecuted. There’s no trespassing where I come from. And Ruth says the board wasn’t there last year.”

“Ah, the Dromards weren’t there last year! They’ve stuck it up—you should pitch into your friend Lord Manister. It’s rather vexatious of them, I grant you; they can’t want to have tea on Gallow Hill; and it’s a pity, because there’s a fine view of the hall from the top.”

“Indeed? Ruth never told me that,” remarked Christina, curiously. “Have they arrived yet?” she added, in apparent idleness.

“Last night, I hear—if you mean the Dromards. And a rumour has arrived with them.”

Now Christina was careful not to inquire what the rumour was; but Erskine told her; and oddly enough, what he had heard and now repeated was to come true immediately.

The great family at Mundham were about to entertain the county. That was the whisper which was presently to be spoken aloud as a pure fact. It ran over the land with “At last!” hissing at its heels, and a still more sinister whisper chased the pair of them: for the Drómards might have entertained the county months before; a house-warming had been expected of them in the winter, but they had chosen to warm Mundham with their own friends from a distance; and since then the General Election had become a moral certainty for the following spring, and—the point was—Viscount Manister had declared his willingness to stand for the division. The

corollary was irresistible ; but so, it appears, was Countess Dromard's invitation, which few are believed to have declined—for those that did so made it known. Some disgust, however, was expressed at the kind of entertainment, which, after all, was to be nothing more than a garden-party. But nearly all who were bidden accepted. The notice, too, was shorter than other people would have presumed to give ; but other people were not the Dromards. The Countess's invitation conveyed to a hundred country homes a joy that was none the less keen for a certain shame or shyness in showing any sort of satisfaction in so small a matter. Nevertheless, though not adorned by a coronet, as it might have been, nor in any way a striking trophy, the card obtained a telling position over many a rectory chimney-piece, where in some instances it remained, accidentally, for months. In justice to the residents, however, it must be owned that not one of them read it with a more poignant

delight, nor adjusted it in the mirror with a nicer care and a finer show of carelessness, nor gazed at it oftener while ostensibly looking at the clock, than did Mrs. Erskine Holland during the next ten days.

But when it came she acted cleverly. There was occasion for all her cleverness, because in her case the invitation was a complete surprise ; she had not dared to expect one ; and you may imagine her peculiar satisfaction at receiving an invitation that embraced her "party." Yet she was able to toss the card across the breakfast-table to Erskine, merely remarking, "Should we go?" And when Tiny at once stated that for her part she was not keen, Ruth gave her a sympathetic look, as much as to say "No more am I, my dear," which might have deceived a less discerning person. But Tiny saw that her sister was holding her breath until Erskine spoke his mind.

"Have we any other engagement?" said he,

directly. "If not, it would hardly do to stick here playing tennis within sight of their lodge. I'm no more keen than you are, Tiny, but that would look uncommon poor. It was very kind of them to think of asking us; I'm afraid we must go; but I am sure you will find it amusing."

"Thanks," replied Christina, to whom this assurance was addressed, "but you needn't send me there to be amused; you see, I have plenty to amuse me here," she added, with a smile that had been slow to come. "I'll go, of course, and with pleasure; but there would be more pleasure in some hard setts with you, Erskine, or in taking your photograph."

"Ah, you don't know what you'd miss, Tiny! I can promise you some sport, if you keep your eyes and ears open. Then you knew Lord Manister in Melbourne. In any case, you oughtn't to go back there without a glimpse of some of our fine folks at home, when you can get it."

“ Oh, I’ll go ; but not for the sport of seeing your clergy and gentry on their knees to your fine folks, nor yet to be amused. As for Lord Manister, he was well enough in Melbourne ; he didn’t give himself airs, and there he was wise. But on his native heath ! One would be sorry to set foot on the same soil. It must be sacred.”

“ Come, I say, I don’t think you’ll find the parsons on their knees. We think a lot of a lord, if you like ; but we try to forget that when we’re talking to him. We do our best to treat him as though he were merely a gentleman, you know,” said Erskine, smiling, but giving, as he felt, an informing hint.

“ Ah, you try ! ” said Christina. “ You do your best ! ”

“ Our best may be very bad,” laughed Erskine ; “ if so, you must show us how to better it, Tiny.”

“ I should get Tiny to teach you how

to treat a lord, dear," said Ruth, who saw nothing to laugh at, and seemed likely to lend her husband a severer support than the occasion needed.

"Say Lord Manister!" suggested Erskine. "Will you show me on him?"

"I may if you're good—you wait and see," said Tiny lightly. And lightly the matter was allowed to drop. For Herbert, as usual, was late for breakfast, which was for once a very good thing; and as for Ruth, it was merely her misfortune to have a near sight for the line dividing chaff from earnest, but now she saw it, and on which side of it the others were, for she had joined them and was laughing herself.

But Herbert would not have laughed at all; indeed, he had not a smile for the subject when he did come down and Ruth gave him his breakfast alone. It seemed well that Christina was not in the room. Her brother took the opportunity of saying what he thought of Manister, and what

Manister had once called him behind his back, and what he would have done to Manister's eye had half as much been said to his face. His personal decision about the garden party was merely contemptuous. He was not going. Nor did he go when the time came. Meanwhile, however, something happened to modify for the moment his opinion of the young Viscount whom it was Herbert's meagre satisfaction to abuse roundly whenever his noble name was spoken.

Having been provided with two rooms at the rectory, in one of which he was expected to read diligently every morning, Herbert entered that room only when his pipe needed filling. He kept his tobacco there, and also, to be sure, his books; but these he never opened. He read nothing, save chance items in an occasional sporting paper; he simply smoked and pottered, leaving the smell of his pipe in the least desirable places. When he took photographs with Tiny,

that was pottering too, for neither of them knew much about it, and Herbert was too indolent to take either pains or care in a pursuit which essentially demands both. He had rather a good eye for a subject; he could arrange a picture with some judgment. That interested him, but the subsequent processes did not, and these invariably spoilt the plate. All his actions, however, suggested an underlying theory that what is worth doing is not necessarily worth doing well. This applied even to his games, about which Herbert was really keen; he played lawn-tennis carelessly, though with a verve and energy somewhat surprising in the loafing, smoking idler of the morning. He had been fond of cricket, too, in Australia; it was a disappointment to him that no cricket was to be had at Essingham. He looked forward to Cambridge for the athletic advantages. He had no intention of reading there; so what, he wanted to know, was the good of his reading here? Certainly, Herbert

had entered at an accommodating college, which would receive young men quite free from previous knowledge ; but he might have been reading for his little-go all this time ; and he never read a word.

But one morning he loitered afield, and came back enthusiastic about a place for a photograph ; the next, Tiny and the implements were dragged to the spot : and really it was not bad. It was a scene on the little river just below Mundham bridge. The thick white rails of the bridge standing out against a clump of trees in the park beyond, the single arch with the dark water underneath and some sunlit ripples twinkling at the further side, seemed to call aloud for a camera ; and Herbert might have used his to some purpose, for a change, had he not forgotten to fill his slides with plates before leaving home. This discovery was not made until the bridge was in focus, and it put young Luttrell in the plight of a rifleman who has sighted the bull's-

eye with an empty barrel. It was a question of returning to the rectory to load the slides, or of giving up the photograph altogether. On another occasion, having forgotten the lens, Herbert had packed up the camera and gone back in disgust. But that happened nearer home. To-day he had carried the camera a good mile. Two journeys with something to show for them were preferable to one with a tired arm for the only result. Within a minute after the slides were found empty, Christina was alone in the meadow below the bridge; Herbert had found it impossible to give up the photograph altogether.

The girl had not lost patience, for she was herself partly to blame. There were, however, still better reasons for her resignation. She happened to have the second volume of "The Newcomes" in her jacket pocket, and the little river seemed to ripple her an invitation from the bridge to make herself comfortable with her book in its shade. There was no great need for shade,

but the idea seemed sensible. With her hand on the book in her pocket, and her eyes hovering about the bridge for the coolest corner, she felt perhaps a little ashamed as she thought of Herbert making a cool day hot by running back alone for what they had both forgotten. It was hardly this feeling, however, that kept her standing where she was.

She had known no finer day in England. The light was strong and limpid, the shadows abrupt and deep. The sky was not cloudless, but the clouds were thin and clean. There was a refreshing amount of wind; the tree-tops beyond the bridge swayed a little against the sky; the focussing-cloth flapped between the tripod legs; and for some minutes the girl stood absently imbibing all this without a thought in her head.

Presently she found herself wondering whether there was enough movement in the trees to mar a photograph; later, she tucked her head under

the cloth to see. As she examined the inverted picture on the ground-glass, she held the cloth loosely over her head and round her neck. But suddenly she twitched it tighter. For first the sound of wheels had come to her ears. Then a dog-cart had been pulled up on the bridge. And now on the focussing-screen a figure was advancing upside-down, like a fly on the ceiling, and doubling its size with each stride, until there occurred a momentary eclipse of the inverted landscape by Lord Manister, who had stalked in broad daylight to our Tiny's side.

CHAPTER VI.

A MATTER OF ANCIENT HISTORY.

THE focussing-cloth clung to her head like a cowl as she raised it and bowed. There must have been nervousness on both sides, for the moment, but it did not prevent Lord Manister from taking off his hat with a sweep and swiftness that amounted almost to a flourish, nor Christina from noticing this and his clothes. He was so admirably attired in summer gray that she took pleasure in reflecting that she was herself unusually shabby, her idea being that contact with the incorrect was rather good for him. Correctness of any kind, it is to be feared, was ridiculously wrong in her eyes. Otherwise she might have been different herself.

“I knew it was you!” Lord Manister declared, having shaken her hand.

“How could you know?” said Christina, smiling. “You must be very clever.”

“I wish I was. No; I met your brother running like anything with some wooden things under his arm. He wouldn’t see me, but I saw him. I was going to pull up, but he wouldn’t see me.”

Miss Luttrell explained that her brother had gone back for plates, which they had both very stupidly forgotten; she added that she was sure he could not have recognised Lord Manister.

“Plates!” said this nobleman. “Ah, they’re important, I know.”

“Well, they’re your cartridges; you can’t shoot anything without them.”

Lord Manister gave a louder laugh than the remark merited; then he studied his boots among the daisies. Christina smiled as she

watched him, until he looked up briskly, and nearly caught her.

“I say, Miss Luttrell, I should like immensely to be on in this scene, if you would let me! I mean to say I should like to see the thing taken. Perhaps you could do with the trap and my mare on the bridge; she’s something special, I assure you. And I have been thinking—if you think so too—that my man might go back for your brother and give him a lift. It must be monstrous hot walking. It’s a monstrous hot day, you know.”

This was not only an exaggeration, but a puff of smoke revealing hidden fires within the young man’s head. Christina fanned the fire until it tinged his cheek, by wilfully hesitating before giving him a gracious answer. For when she spoke it was to say with a smile at his anxiety, “Really you are very considerate, Lord Manister, and I am sure Herbert will be grateful.” They walked to the bridge, and

stood upon it the next minute, watching the dog-cart swing out of sight where the road bent.

"Your brother is very likely half-way back by this time," remarked Lord Manister, who would have been very sorry to believe what he was saying; "I dare say my man will pick him up directly; if so, they'll be back in a minute."

"I hope they will," said Christina—"the light is so excellent just now," she was in a hurry to add.

"Ah, the light in Australia was better for this sort of thing."

"As a rule, yes; but it would surely be difficult to beat this morning anywhere; the great thing is, over here, that you are so free from glare."

"Then you like England?"

"Well, I must say I like this corner of England; I haven't seen much else, you know."

"Good! I am glad you like this corner; you know, it's ours," said the young fellow

simply. Then he paused. "How strange to meet you here, though!" he added, as if he could not help it, nor the slight stress that laid itself upon the personal pronoun.

"It should rather strike me as strange to meet you," Miss Luttrell replied pointedly; "for I am sure I told you that my sister and her husband had taken Essingham Rectory for August. You may have forgotten the occasion. It was in London."

"Dear me, no, I'm not likely to forget it. To be sure, you told me—at Lady Almeric's."

"Then perhaps you remember saying that you knew *of* Essingham?"

It was not, perhaps, because this was very dryly said that Lord Manister smiled. Nor was the smile one of his best, which were charming; it was visibly the expression of his nervousness, not his mirth.

"Yes, I am sorry to say I do remember that," he confessed, with an awkwardness and

humility which made Christina tingle in a sudden appreciation of his position in the world. "It was very foolish of me, Miss Luttrell."

"I wonder what made you?" remarked Christina reflectively, but in a friendlier tone.

"Ah! don't wonder," he said impatiently. His eyes fell upon her for one moment, then wandered down the road, as he added strangely: "You do and say so many foolish things without a decent why or wherefore. They're the things for which you never forgive yourself! They're the things for which you never hope to be forgiven!"

The girl did not look at him, but her glance chased his down the road to the bend where the dog-cart had vanished and would reappear. She, however, was the next to speak, for something had occurred to her that she very much desired to explain.

"You see, I didn't know you lived here. I

had never heard of Mundham when we met in town ; if I had, I shouldn't have known it was yours. I never dreamt that I should meet you here. You understand, Lord Manister ? ”

“ My dear Miss Luttrell,” cried Manister earnestly, “ anybody could see that ! ”

So Christina lost nothing by her little exhibition of anxiety to impress this point upon him ; for his reply was a triumphant flourish of the opinion she desired him to hold, to show her that he had it already ; and his anxiety in the matter was even more apparent than her own.

“ Thank you, Lord Manister,” said Christina, looking him full in the face. Then her glance dropped to his hand ; and his fingers were entangled in his watch-chain ; and in the knowledge that the greater awkwardness was on his side she raised her eyes confidently, and met the dogged stare of a young Briton about to make a clean breast of his misdeeds.

“ Do you want to know why I didn't

mention our having taken this place—that time in town?”

“That depends whether you want to tell me.”

“I must tell you. It was because I feared—I mean to say, it crossed my mind—that perhaps you mightn’t care to come here if you knew!”

He paused and watched her. She was looking down, with her chin half buried in the focussing-cloth, which had slipped from her head and fallen round her shoulders. The coolness of her face against the black velvet exasperated him, and the more so because he felt himself flushing as he added, “I see I was a fool to fear that.”

“It was certainly unnecessary, Lord Manister,” said the girl, calmly, and not without a note of amusement in her voice.

“So you don’t mind meeting one!”

“Lord Manister, I am delighted. Why should I mind?”

“You know I behaved like a brute.”

"You did, I'm afraid." He winced. "You went away without saying good-bye to your friends."

"I went away without saying good-bye to you."

"Among others."

"No!" he cried sharply. "You and I were more than friends."

Christina drummed the ground with one foot. Her glance passed over Lord Manister's shoulder. He knew that it waited for the dog-cart at the bend of the road.

"We were more than friends," he repeated desperately.

"I don't think we ever were."

"But you thought so once!"

The girl's lip curled, but her eyes still waited in the road.

"I wonder what you yourself thought once, Lord Manister?" she said quietly. "Whatever it was, it didn't last long; but I forgive that

freely. Do you know why? Why, because it was exactly the same with me."

"Do you forgive me for getting you talked about?" exclaimed Lord Manister.

"Yes—because it is the only thing I have to forgive," returned Christina, after a moment's hesitation. "The rest was nonsense: and I wish you wouldn't rake it up in this dreadfully serious way."

We know what Christina might mean by nonsense. Lord Manister was not the first of her friends whom she had offended by her abuse of the word. "It was not nonsense!" he cried. "It was something either better or worse. I give you my word that I honestly meant it to be something better. But my people sent for me. What could I do?"

His voice and eyes were pitiable; but Christina showed him no pity.

"What, indeed!" she said ironically. "I myself never blamed you for going. I was

quite sure that you were the passive party, though others said differently. All I have to forgive, is what you made other people say ; but the whole affair is a matter of ancient history—and do you think we need talk about it any more, Lord Manister ? ”

“It is not all I have to forgive myself,” he answered bitterly, disregarding her question. “If only you would hate me, I could hate myself less ; but I deserve your contempt. Yet if you knew what has been in my heart all this time, you would pity one. You have haunted me ! I have been good for nothing ever since I came back to England. My people will tell you so, when you get to know them. My mother would tell you in a minute. She has never heard your name . . . but she knows there was someone . . . she knows there is someone still ! ”

Christina had coloured at last ; but as she coloured, the trot of a horse came gratefully to her attentive ears.

“You must think no more about it,” she whispered; and her flush deepened.

“You wipe it all out?” he cried eagerly.

“Of course I do.”

Her eyes met the dog-cart at the bend. Herbert was in it.

“And we start afresh?”

He thought he was to get no answer. She was gazing anxiously at Herbert as the trap approached; as it drew up on the bridge she murmured, “I think we had better let well alone,” without looking at Lord Manister. “Herbert, you remember Lord Manister?” she cried aloud in the same breath.

Herbert’s look was not reassuring. He was, in fact, disgusted with all present but the groom, and most of all with himself for being where he was. Nor was he the young man to trouble to hide his feelings, and he showed them now in so black a look that Christina, who knew him, was filled with apprehension. Thanks to Lord

Manister's tact, that look did not last. Manister, who had his own impression of young Luttrell's character, and had not to be shrewd to guess the other's attitude towards himself, brought his most graceful manner to bear on the situation. With Tiny Luttrell, during the bad quarter of an hour which he had deserved and now endured, his best manner had not been at his command; but it returned to him with the return of the dog-cart, and in time to do him a service. He had hardly shaken hands with Herbert, when he asked him, as an Australian and therefore a judge, his opinion of the mare.

The touch would have been too heavy for an older man; but Herbert was barely twenty, and it flattered him to the marrow. Christina was relieved to hear his knowing but laudatory comments on the mare's points. She knew that, despite her brother's aggressive independence, he was susceptible enough to marked civility. This, indeed, he never expected, and he was ever ready

to return, with interest, some fancied slight; but Christina had never known him rude to anyone going out of his way to be polite to him, as Lord Manister was doing this morning. She divined that politeness from a nobleman was not less gratifying to Herbert because he happened to have maligned the nobleman with much industry. Herbert's modest desire was to be treated as an equal by all men, and he was now being treated as an equal by a lord. This was all he required to make him reasonably civil, even to Lord Manister. When Manister asked him, almost deferentially, whether the mare could be taken in the photograph, he offered his lordship a place in it too, the offer being declined, but not without many thanks.

"I'm going to help take it," Manister laughed. "Mind you don't move, Luttrell. I'm going to help your sister. Hadn't you better come too, and leave my man alone in his glory?"

Herbert replied that he would take off the cap, or do anything they liked. So the three went down into the meadow, and some infamous negatives resulted later. At the time, care seemed to be taken by the photographers, while Lord Manister stood at a little distance, laughing a good deal. He was pressed to stand in the foreground, but not by Christina, and he steadily refused. The conciliation of his enemy seemed assured without that, though he did think of something else to make it doubly sure.

"By the way, Luttrell," he said, as the camera was being packed away, "you're a cricketer to a certainty—you're an Australian."

"I'm very fond of it," the Australian replied, "but I haven't played over here; I've never had the slant."

"Well, we play a bit; come over and practise with us."

Herbert thanked him, declaring that he should like nothing better.

"Lord Manister is a great cricketer," Christina observed.

"Come over and practise," repeated his lordship cordially. "The ground isn't at all bad, considering it was only made last winter, and there's a professor to bowl to you. We have some matches coming on presently. Perhaps we might find a place for you."

This was the one thing Lord Manister said which came within measurable distance of offending the touchy Herbert. A minute later they had parted company.

"They *might* find a place for me," Herbert repeated, as he and Tiny turned towards the village, while Lord Manister drove off in the opposite direction, with another slightly ornamental sweep of his hat. "Might they, indeed! I wouldn't take it. My troubles about their matches! But I could enjoy a practice."

"He said he would send over for you next time they do practise."

Those had been Lord Manister's last words.

"He did. He is improved. He's a sportsman, after all. It was decent of him to send back the trap for me. But I didn't want to get in—I was jolly scotty with myself for getting in. I say, Tiny!"

"Well?"

He had her by the arm.

"I don't ask any questions. I don't want to know a single thing. I hope he went down on his knees for his sins; I hope you gave him fits! But look here, Tiny; I won't say a word about this inside, if you'd rather I didn't."

"I'd rather you did," Tiny said at once. "There's nothing to hide. But—you can be a dear good boy when you like, Herbs!"

"Can I? Then you can be offended if you like—but he's on the job now if he never was in his life before!"

"I won't say I hope he isn't," Tiny whispered. So she was not offended.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHADOW OF THE HALL.

SUCH was Christina's first meeting with Lord Manister in his own country. It occurred while his mother's invitation was exhilarating so many homes, and on the day when the Mundham mail-bag would not hold the first draught of prompt replies. Until the garden-party itself, however, no one at the rectory saw any more of Lord Manister, who had gone for a few days to the Marquis of Wymondham's place in Scotland, where he shot dreadfully on the Twelfth and was otherwise in queer form, considering that Miss Garth was also one of the guests. But under all the circumstances it is not difficult to imagine Manister worried and unhappy during this interval; which, on the other hand, remained in the minds of the

people at the rectory, Christina included, as the pleasantest part of their month there.

Not that they suspected this at the time. Mrs. Erskine, especially, found these days a little slow. Having knowledge of Lord Manister's whereabouts, she was impatient for his return, and the more so because Christina seemed to have forgotten his existence. Christina was indeed puzzling, and on one embarrassing occasion, which with some girls would have led to a scene, she puzzled Ruth more than ever. Ruth tried to follow her presumptive example, and to put aside the thought of Lord Manister for the time being. Her consolation meanwhile was the lively *camaraderie* between Christina and Erskine, wherein Erskine's wife took a delight for which we may forgive her much.

"How well you two get on!" she would say gladly to each of them.

"He's a man and a brother," Tiny would reply.

To which Ruth was sure to say tenderly :
“ It’s sweet of you, dear, to look upon him as a brother.”

“ Ah, but don’t you forget that he’s a man, and not my brother really, but just the very best of pals !” Tiny said once. “ That’s the beauty of him. He’s the only man who ever talked sense to me right through from the beginning, so he’s something new. He’s the only man I ever liked without having the least desire to flirt with him, if you particularly want to know. And I don’t believe his being my brother-in-law has anything to do with that,” added the girl, reflectively ; “ it would have been the same in any case. What’s better still, he’s the only man who ever understood me, my dear.”

“ He’s very clever, you see,” observed Ruth, slyly, but also in all seriousness.

“ That’s the worst of him ; he makes you feel your ignorance.”

"I assure you, Tiny, he thinks *you* very clever."

"So you're crackin'!" laughed Tiny; and as the old bush slang filled her mouth unbidden, the smell of a hot wind at Wallandoon came into her nostrils; and there seemed no more to be said.

But that last assurance of Ruth's was still ringing in her ears when her thoughts got back from the bush. She did not believe a word of it. Yet it was more or less true. Nor was Erskine far wrong in any opinion he had expressed to his wife concerning Christina, of whom, perhaps, he had said even less than he thought.

She was not, indeed, to be called an intellectual girl, in these days least of all. That was her misfortune, or otherwise, as you happen to think. Intellectual possibilities, however, she possessed: raw brain with which much might have been done. Not much can

be done by a governess on a station in the back-blocks. Merely in curing the girls of the twang of Australia, more successfully than of its slang, and in teaching Tiny to sing rather nicely, the governess at Wallandoon had done wonders. But gifts that were of more use to Christina were natural, such as the quick perception, the long memory and the ready tongue, with which she defended the doors of her mind, so that few might guess the poverty of the store within. Nor had the governess been able to add much to that store. The liking for books had not come to Christina at Wallandoon; but in Melbourne she had taken to reading, and had revelled in a deal of trash; and now in England she read whatever Erskine put in her hands, and honestly enjoyed most of it, with the additional relish of being proud of her enjoyment. Erskine thought her discriminating, too; but converts to good books are apt to flatter the saviours of their taste, and perhaps her brother-in-law was a

poor judge of the girl's judgment. He liked her for finding Colonel Newcome's life more touching than his death, and for placing the Colonel second to Dr. Primrose in the order of her gods after reading "The Vicar of Wakefield." He was delighted with her confession that she should "love to be loved by Clive Newcome," while her defence of Miss Ethel, which was vigorous enough to betray a fellow-feeling, was interesting at the time, and more so later, when there was occasion to remember it. Similar interest attached to another confession, that she had long envied CEnone and Elaine "because they were really in love." She seemed to have mixed some good poetry with the bad novels that had contented her in Melbourne. Two more books which she learnt to love now were "Sesame and Lilies" and "Virginibus Puerisque." It was Erskine Holland's privilege to put each into her hands for the first time, and perhaps she never pleased him quite so much as when she said : "It makes me think

less of myself ; it has made me horribly unhappy ; but if they were going to hang me in the morning I would sit up all night to read it again ! ” That was her grace after “ Sesame and Lilies.”

“ Why don’t you make Ruth read too ? ” she asked him once, quite idly, when they had been talking about books.

“ She has a good deal to think about,” Erskine replied after a little hesitation. “ She’s too busy to read.”

“ Or too happy,” suggested Tiny.

Mr. Holland made a longer pause, looking gratefully at the girl, as though she had given him a new idea, which he would gladly entertain if he could. “ I wonder whether that’s possible ? ” he said at last.

“ I’m sure it is. Ruth is so happy that books can do nothing for her ; the happy ones show her no happiness so great as her own, and she thinks the sad ones stupid. The other day,

when I insisted on reading her my favourite thing in 'Virginibus' ——"

"What is your favourite thing?" interrupted Erskine.

"'El Dorado'—it's the most beautiful thing you have put me on to yet, of its size. I could hardly see my way through the last page—I can't tell you why—only because it was so beautiful, I think, and so awfully true! But Ruth saw nothing to cry over; I'm not sure that she saw much to admire; and that's all because you have gone and made her so happy."

For some minutes Erskine looked grim. Then he smiled.

"But aren't you happy, too, Tiny?"

"I'm as happy as I deserve to be. That's good enough, isn't it?"

"Quite. You must be as happy as you're pleased to think Ruth."

"Well, then, I'm not. I should like to be

some good in the world, and I'm no good at all!"

"I am sorry to see it take you like that," said Erskine gravely. "I wouldn't have thought this of you, Tiny!"

"Ah, there are many things you wouldn't think of me," remarked Tiny. She spoke a little sadly, and she said no more. And this time her sudden silence came from no vision of the bush, but from what she loved much less—a glimpse of herself in the mirror of her own heart.

There was one thing, certainly, that none of them would have thought of her; for she never told them of her little quiet meddlings in the village. But I could tell you. Pleasant it would be to write of what she did for Mrs. Clapperton (who certainly seemed to have been unfairly treated), and of the memories that lived after her in more cottages than one. But you are to see her as they did who saw most of her: and to remember that nothing is more delightful than

being kind to the grateful poor, especially when one is privately depressed. Little was ever known of the liberties taken by Christina's generosity, and nothing shall be recorded here. She must stand or fall without that, as in the eyes of her friends. Suffice it that she did amuse herself in this way on the sly, and found it good for restoring her vanity, which was suffering secretly all this time. She would have been the last to take credit for any good she may have done in Essingham. She knew that it wiped out nothing, and also that it made her happier than she would have been otherwise. For though a worse time came later, even now she was not comfortable in her heart. And she had by no means forgotten the existence of Lord Manister, as someone feared.

Ruth, however, put her own conversation under studious restraint during these days, many of which passed without any mention of Lord Manister's name at the rectory. The distracting

proximity of his stately home was apparently forgotten in this peaceful spot. But the wife of one clerical neighbour, a Mrs. Willoughby, who accompanied her husband when he came to play lawn-tennis with Mr. Holland, and indeed wherever the poor man went, cherished a grudge against the young nobleman's family of which she made no secret. It was only natural that this lady should air her grievance on the lawn at Essingham, whence there was a distant prospect of lodge and gates to goad her tongue. Yet when she did so, it was as though the sun had come out suddenly and thrown the shadow of the hall across the rectory garden.

"As for this garden-party," cried Mrs. Willoughby, as it seemed for the benefit of the gentlemen, who had put on their coats, and were handing tea-cups under the trees, "I consider it an insult to the county. It comes too late in the day to be regarded as anything else. Why didn't they do something when first they came here?"

They have had the place a year. Why didn't they give a ball in the winter, or a set of dinner-parties if they preferred that? Shall I tell you why, Mr. Holland? It was because the General Election was further off then, and it hadn't occurred to them to put up Lord Manister for the division."

"They haven't been here a year, my dear, by any means," observed Mrs. Willoughby's husband; "and as for dinner-parties, we, at any rate, have dined with them."

"Well, I wouldn't boast about it," answered Mrs. Willoughby, who had a sharp manner in conversation, and a specially staccato note for her husband. "We dined with them, it is true. I suppose they thought they must do the civil to a neighbouring rector or two. But, as their footman had the insolence to tell our coachman, Mrs. Holland, they considered things had reached a pretty pass when it came to dining the country clergy!"

"Their footman considered," murmured Mr. Willoughby.

"He was repeating what he had heard at table," the lady affirmed, as though she had heard it herself. "They had made a joke of it—before their servants. So they don't catch me at their garden-party, which is to satisfy our social cravings and secure our votes. I don't visit with snobs, Mrs. Holland, for all their coronets and Norman blood—of which, let me tell you, they haven't one drop between them. Who was the present Earl's great-grandfather, I should like to know? He never had one; they are not only snobs but upstarts, the Dromards."

"At any rate," Mr. Holland said, mildly, "they can't gain anything by being civil to *us*. We don't represent a single vote. We are here for one calendar month."

"Ah, it is wise to be disinterested here and there," rejoined Mrs. Willoughby, whose

sharpness was not merely vocal ; “ it supplies an instance, and that’s worth a hundred arguments. Now I shouldn’t wonder, Mr. Holland, if they didn’t go out of their way to be quite nice to you. I shouldn’t wonder a bit. It would advertise their disinterestedness. But wait till you meet them in Piccadilly ! ”

“ Mrs. Willoughby is a cynic,” laughed Erskine, turning to the clergyman, whose wife swallowed her tea complacently with this compliment to sweeten it. To so many minds a charge of cynicism would seem to imply that intellectual superiority which is cheap at the price of a moral defect.

Now Erskine had a lawn-tennis player staying with him for the inside of this week ; and the lawn-tennis player was a fallen cricketer, who had played against the Eton eleven when young Manister was in it ; and he ventured to suggest that the division might find a worse candidate. “ He was a nice enough boy then,”

said he, "and I recollect he made runs; he's a good fellow still, from all accounts."

"From all *my* accounts," retorted Mrs. Willoughby, refreshed by her tea, "he's a very fast one!"

Erskine's friend had never heard that, though he understood that Manister had fallen off in his cricket; he had not seen the young fellow for years; nor did he think any more about him at the moment, being drawn by Herbert into cricket-talk which stopped his ears to the general conversation just as this became really interesting.

"That reminds me!" Mrs. Willoughby exclaimed, turning to Ruth. "Was Lord Manister out in Australia in your time?"

Ruth said "No," rather nervously, for Mrs. Willoughby's manner alarmed her. "I was married just before he came out," she added; "as a matter of fact, our steamers crossed in the Canal."

“Well, you know what a short time he stayed there, for a Governor’s aide-de-camp?”

“Only a few months, I have heard. Do let me give you another cup of tea, Mrs. Willoughby!”

“Now I wonder if you know,” pursued this lady, having cursorily declined more tea, “how he came to leave so suddenly?”

Poor Mrs. Holland shook her head, which was inwardly besieged with impossible tenders for a change of subject. No one helped her: Tiny had perhaps already lost her presence of mind: Erskine did not understand: the other two were not listening. Ruth could think of no better expedient than a third cup for Christina. As she passed it her own hand trembled, but venturing to glance at her sister’s face, she was amazed to find it not only free from all sign of self-consciousness or of anxiety, but filled with unaffected interest. For this was the occasion on which Christina’s coolness quite baffled

Ruth, who for her part was preparing for a scene.

“ Shall I tell you ? ” asked Mrs. Willoughby.

“ Do,” said Christina, to whom the well-informed lady at once turned.

“ He formed an attachment out there, Miss Luttrell ! He could only get out of it by fleeing the country ; so he fled. You look as though you knew all about it,” she added (making Ruth shudder), for the girl had smiled knowingly.

“ About which ? ” asked Tiny.

“ What ! Were there more affairs than one ? ”

“ Some people said so.”

Mrs. Willoughby glanced around her with a glittering eye, and was sorry to notice that two of her hearers were not listening. “ That is just what I expected,” she informed the other four. “ If you tell me that Melbourne became too hot to hold him, I shall not be surprised.”

“ Melbourne made rather a fuss about him,” replied Christina, in an excusing tone that

pierced Ruth's embarrassment and pricked to life her darling hopes. "He was not greatly to blame."

"But he broke the poor girl's heart. I should blame him for that, to say the least of it."

"You surprise me," said Christina gravely; "I thought that people at Home never blamed each other for anything they did in the Colonies? Over here you are particular, I know; but I thought it was correct not to be too particular when out there. Your writers come out, we treat them like lords, and then they do nothing but abuse us: your lords come out, we treat them like princes, and you see, they break our hearts. Of course they do! We expect it of them. It's all we look for in the Colonies."

"You are not serious, Miss Luttrell," said Mrs. Willoughby in some displeasure. "To my mind it is a serious thing. It seems a sad thing, too, to me. But I may be old-fashioned;

the present generation would crack jokes across an open grave, as I am well aware. Yet there isn't much joke in a young girl having her heart broken by such as Lord Manister, is there? And that's what literally happened, for my friend Mrs. Foster-Simpson knows all about it. She knows all about the Dromards—to her cost!"

"Ah, we know the Foster-Simpsons; they called on us last year," remarked Erskine, who devoutly trusted that they would not call again. His amusement at Christina hardly balanced his weariness of Mrs. Willoughby, and he took off his coat as he spoke.

"Does your friend know the poor girl's name, Mrs. Willoughby?" Tiny asked when the men had gone back to the court; and her tone was now as sympathetic as could possibly be desired.

"I'm sorry to say she does not; it's the one thing she has been unable to find out," said Mrs.

Willoughby, naïvely. "Perhaps you could tell me, Miss Luttrell?"

"Perhaps I could," said Christina, smiling, as she rose to seek a ball which had been hit into the churchyard. "Only, you see, I don't know which of them it was. It wouldn't be fair to give you a list of names to guess from, would it?"

Fortunately Mrs. Willoughby put no further questions to Ruth, who was intensely thankful. "For," as she told Christina afterwards, "*I* was on pins and needles the whole time. I never did know anyone like you for keeping cool under fire!"

"It depends on the fire," Tiny said. "Mrs. Willoughby went off by accident, and luckily she was not pointing at anybody."

"And I'm glad she did, now it's over!" exclaimed Ruth. "Don't you see that I was quite right about your name? So now you need have no more qualms about the garden-party."

“ Perhaps I’ve had no qualms for some time ; perhaps I’ve known you were right.”

“ Since when ? Since—since you saw Lord Manister ? ”

Tiny nodded.

“ Do you mean to say you talked about it ? ”
Ruth whispered, in delicious awe.

“ I mustn’t tell you what *he* talked about. He was as nice as he could be—though I should have preferred to find him less beautifully dressed in the country ; but I always felt that about him. I am sure, however, of one thing : he was no more to blame than—I was. I have always felt this about him, too.”

“ Tiny dear, if only I could understand you ! ”

“ If only you could ! Then you might help me to understand myself.”

CHAPTER VIII.

“COUNTESS DROMARD AT HOME.”

THE hall gates were plain enough from the rectory lawn, but plainer still from the steps, whence, on the afternoon of the garden-party, Mr. Holland watched them from under the brim of the first hard hat he had worn for a fortnight. He was ready, while the ladies were traditionally late; but he did not lose patience: he was too much entertained in watching the hall gates and the hedge-row that hid the road leading up to them. Vehicles were filing along this road in a procession which for the moment was continuous. Erskine could see them over the hedge, and it was difficult to do so without sharing some opinions which Mrs. Willoughby had expressed regarding the comprehensive character of the

social measure taken not before it was time by the noble family within those gates. There were county clergymen driving themselves in ill-balanced dog-carts, and county townspeople in carriages manifestly hired, and county big-wigs—as big as the Dromards themselves—in splendid equipages with splendid coachmen and horseflesh the most magnificent. Greater processional versatility might scarcely be seen in south-western suburbs on Derby Day; and the low phaeton which he himself was about to contribute to the medley made Erskine laugh.

"We should follow the next really swagger turn-out—we should run behind it," he suggested to the girls, when at length they appeared; and Ruth took him seriously.

"No, get in front of them," said Herbert, who was lounging on the steps, in dirty flannels which Erskine envied him. "Get in front of them and slow down. That'd be the sporting

thing to do! They couldn't pass you in the drive. It would do 'em good."

However, the procession was not without gaps, and to Ruth's satisfaction they found themselves in rather a wide one. As they drove through those august gates a parson's dog-cart was rounding a curve some distance ahead, but nothing was in sight behind. Ruth sat beside her husband, who drove. She looked rather demure, but very charming in her little matronly bonnet; her costume was otherwise somewhat noticeably sober; and certainly she had never felt more sensibly the married sister than now, as she glanced at Christina with furtive anxiety but open admiration. Tiny was neatly dressed in white, and her hat was white also. "Do you know why I wear a white hat?" she asked Erskine on the way; but her question proved merely to be an impudent adaptation of a very disreputable old riddle, and beyond this she was unusually silent during the short drive.

Yet she seemed not only self-possessed, but inwardly at her ease. She sat on the little seat in front, often turning round to gaze ahead, and her curiosity and interest were very frank and natural. So were her admiration of the park, her anxiety to see the house itself, and even her wonder at the great length of the drive, which ran alongside the cricket-field, and then bent steadily to the left. When at last the low red-brick pile became visible, Gallow Hill was seen immediately behind it, which surprised Christina; the lawn in front was alive with people, which put her on her mettle; and the inspiriting outburst of a military band, at that moment, forced from her an admission of the pleasure and excitement which had been growing upon her for some minutes.

"I like this!" she exclaimed. "This is first-rate England!"

Countess Dromard stood on the edge of the lawn at the front of the house, and apparently

the carriages were unloading at this side of the drive. Ruth whispered hurriedly that she was sure they were, but she was not so sure in reality, and she now saw the disadvantage of arriving in a wide gap, which deprives the inexperienced of their lawful cue. She was quite right, however, and when some minutes elapsed before the arrival of another carriage to interrupt the charming little conversation Ruth had with Lady Dromard, the good of the gap became triumphantly apparent. The Countess was very kind indeed. She was a tall, fine woman, with whom the shadows of life had scarce begun to lengthen to the eye; her face was not only handsome, but wonderfully fresh, and she had a trick of lowering it as she chatted with Ruth, bending over her in a way which was comfortable and almost motherly from the first. She had heard of Mrs. Holland, whom she was glad to meet at last, and of whom she now hoped to see something more. Ruth observed that they had

the rectory only till September; she was sorry her time was so short. Lady Dromard very flatteringly echoed her sorrow, and also professed an envious admiration for the rectory, which she described as idyllic. That was practically all. What was said of the weather hardly counted; and a repetition of her ladyship's hopes of seeing something more of Mrs. Holland and her party was not worth remembering, according to Erskine, who declared that this meant nothing at all.

Ruth, however, was not likely to forget it: though she treasured just as much the memory of a certain glance which she had caught the Countess levelling at her sister. She thought that other eyes also were attracted by the white-robed Tiny, and the smooth-shaven turf was air to Ruth's tread as she marched off with her husband and that cynosure. Nor was her satisfaction decreased when the first person they came across chanced to be no other than Mrs. Willoughby.

This meeting was literally the unexpected treat that Ruth pronounced it to be, for the clergyman's wife was smiling in a manner which showed that she had witnessed the Countess's singular civility to her friend.

"Yes, I'm here after all," said Mrs. Willoughby grimly. "Henry made me very angry by insisting on coming, but of course I wasn't going to let him come alone. I hope you think he looks happy now he's here!" (Mr. Willoughby and a brother rector might have been hatching dark designs against their bishop, who was himself present, judging by their looks.) "*I* call him the picture of misery. Well, Mrs. Holland, I hope you are gratified at your reception! Oh, it was quite gushing, I assure you; we have all been watching. But wait till you meet them in Piccadilly, my dear Mrs. Holland."

Mrs. Holland left the reply to her husband, who, however, contented himself with promising

Mrs. Willoughby a telegraphic report of the proceedings at that meeting, if it ever took place.

"Ah, there won't be much to report," said that redoubtable woman; "they won't look at you. But I shouldn't be surprised to see them make a deal of you in the country, if you let them."

It did not seem conducive to the enjoyment of the afternoon to prolong the conversation with Mrs. Willoughby. The party of three wandered towards the band, admiring the scarlet coats of the bandsmen against the dark green of the shrubbery, and their bright brass instruments flaming in the sun. The music, also, was of much spirit and gaiety, and it was agreed that a band was an immense improvement to a rite of this sort. Then these three, who, after all, knew very few people present, followed the example of others, and made a circuit of the house, in high good-humour. But Tiny found

herself between two conversational fires, for Ruth would compel her to express admiration for the premises, which might have been taken for granted, while Erskine called her attention to the people, who were much more entertaining to watch. As they passed a table devoted to refreshments, at which a large lady was being waited upon very politely by a small boy in a broad collar, they overheard one of those scraps of conversation which amuse at the moment.

“So you’re a Dromard boy, are you?” the lady was saying. “I’ve never seen you before. What Dromard boy are *you*, pray?”

“My name’s Douglas.”

“Oh! So you’re the Honourable Douglas Dromard, are you?”

The boy handed her an ice without answering as the three passed on.

“I said you’d see and hear some queer things,” whispered Mr. Holland; “but you won’t hear anything much finer than that.

The woman is Mrs. Foster-Simpson ; her husband's a solicitor, and may be the Conservative agent, if his wife doesn't disqualify him. She professes to know all about the Dromards, as you heard the other day. You can guess the kind of knowledge. Even the boy snubs her. Yet mark him. The mixture of politeness and contempt was worth noticing in a small boy like that. There's a little nobleman for you ! ”

“ No, a little Englishman,” said Tiny. “ Now that's a thing I do envy you—your schoolboys, your little gentlemen ! We don't grow them so little in the Colonies ; we don't know how.”

They were walking on a majestic terrace in the shadow of the red-brick house, their figures mirrored in each mullioned window as they passed it.

“ I call Lord Manister the luckiest young man in England,” Ruth exclaimed during a pause between the other two. “ To think that all this will be his ! ”

"It rather reminds me of Hampton Court on this side," remarked Tiny, indifferently.

"And it's by no means their only place, you know ; there are others they never use, are there not, Erskine ?—to say nothing of all those squares and streets in town !"

But Erskine sounded the thick sibilant of silence as they passed a shabby-looking person with a slouching walk and a fair beard.

"I wonder how *he* got here," Tiny murmured next moment.

"He has a better right than most of us."

"What do you mean, Erskine ?"

"Well, it's the Earl."

"Earl Dromard ? I should have guessed his gardener !"

"No, that's the Earl. Old clothes are his special fancy in the country. It's his particular form of side, so they say."

"Well," said Tiny, "I prefer it to his son's,

which has always appeared to me to be the other extreme."

"I am sure Lord Manister is not overdressed," remonstrated Ruth, with her usual alacrity in defence of his lordship.

"No, that's the worst of him," answered her sister. "There is nothing to find fault with, ever; that's what makes one think he employs his intellect on the study of his appearance."

They had seen Lord Manister in the distance. Presumably he had not seen them, but he might have done so; and Ruth supposed it was the doubt that made her sister speak of him more captiously than usual. But the criticism was not utterly unfair, as Ruth might presently have seen for herself; for as they came back to the front of the house, Lord Manister detached himself from a group, and approached them with the suave smile and the slight flourish of the hat which were two of his tricks. Christina asked afterwards if the flourish was not dreadfully

Continental, but she was told that it was merely up-to-date, like the hat itself. At the time, however, she introduced Lord Manister to her sister Mrs. Erskine Holland, and to Mr. Holland, taking this liberty with charming grace and tact, yet with a becoming amount of natural shyness. Manister, for one, was pleased with the introduction on all grounds. From the first, however, he addressed himself to the married lady, speaking partly of the surrounding country, for which Ruth could not say too much, and partly of Melbourne, which enabled him to return her compliments. His manner was eminently friendly and polite. Discovering that they had not yet been in the house for tea, he led the way thither, and through a throng of people in the hall, and so into the dining-room. Here he saved the situation from embarrassment by making himself equally attentive to another party. To Ruth, however, Lord Manister's civility was still sufficiently marked, while he asked her husband

whether he was a cricketer; and this reminded him of Herbert, for whom he gave Miss Luttrell a message. He said they had just arranged some cricket for the last week of the month; he thought they would be glad of Miss Luttrell's brother in one or two of the matches. But he seemed to fear that most of the teams were made up; his young brother was arranging everything. Christina gathered that in any case they would be glad to see Herbert at the nets any afternoon of the following week, more especially on the Monday. Lord Manister made a point of the message, and also of the cricket week, "When," he said, "you must all turn up if it's fine." And those were his last words to them.

"I see you know my son," said the Countess in her kindest manner, as Ruth thanked her for a charming afternoon.

"My sister met him the other day at Lady Almeric's," replied Ruth, "and before that in Australia."

“ I knew Lord Manister in Melbourne,” added Tiny, with freedom.

“ Do you mean to tell me you are Australians ? ” said Lady Dromard, in a tone that complimented the girls at the expense of their country. “ Then you must certainly come and see me,” she added cordially, though her surprise was still upon her. “ I am greatly interested in Australia since my son was there. I feel I have a welcome for all Australians—you welcomed him, you know ! ”

Christina afterwards expressed the firm opinion that Lady Dromard had said this rather strangely, which Ruth as firmly denied. Tiny was accused of an imaginative self-consciousness, and the accusation provoked a blush, which Ruth took care to remember. Certainly, if the Countess had spoken queerly, the queerness had escaped the one person who was not on the look-out for something of the kind: Erskine Holland had perceived nothing but her ladyship's condescension, which had been indeed remarkable, though

Erskine still told his wife to expect no further notice from that quarter.

"And I'm selfish enough to hope you'll get none, my dears," he said to the girls that evening, as they sauntered through the kitchen-garden after dinner ; "because for my part I'd much rather not be noticed by them. We were not intended to take seriously anything that was said this afternoon ; honey was the order of the day for all comers—and can't you imagine them wiping their foreheads when we were all gone ? I only hope they wiped us out of their heads ! We're much happier as we are. I'm not rabid, like Mrs. Willoughby ; but she prophesied a very possible experience, when all's said and done, confound her ! I have visions of Piccadilly myself. And seriously, Ruth, you wouldn't like it if you became friendly with these people here and they cut you in town ; no more should I. I think you can't be too careful with people of that sort ; and if they ask us again, I vote we

don't go ; but they won't ask us any more, you may depend upon it."

"I don't depend upon it, all the same," replied Ruth with some spirit. "Lady Dromard was most kind ; and as for Lord Manister, I was enchanted with him."

"Were you?" Tiny said, feeling vaguely that she was challenged.

"I was ; I thought him unaffected and friendly, and even simple. I am sure he is simple-minded ! I am also sure that you won't find another young man in his position who is better-natured or better-hearted——"

"Or better-mannered — or better-dressed ! You are quite right ; he is nearly perfect. He is rather too perfect for me in his manners and appearance ; I should like to untidy him ; I should like to put him in a temper. Lord Manister was never in a temper in his life ; he's nicer than most people—but he's too nice altogether for me !"

"You knew him rather well in Melbourne?" said Erskine, eyeing his sister-in-law curiously; her face was towards the moon, and her expression was set and scornful.

"Very well indeed," she answered, with her erratic candour.

"I might have guessed as much that time in town. I say, if we meet *him* in Piccadilly we may score off Mrs. Willoughby yet! Wait till we get back——"

"All right; only don't let us wait out here," Ruth interrupted—"or Tiny and I may have to go back in our coffins!"

CHAPTER IX.

MOTHER AND SON.

A CLEVER man is not necessarily an infallible prophet ; and the clever man who is married may well preserve an intellectual lustre in the eyes of his admirer by never prophesying at all. But should he take pleasure in predicting the thing that is openly deprecated at the other side of the hearth, let him see to it that his prediction comes true, for otherwise he has whetted a blade for his own breast, from whose justifiable use only an angel could abstain. There was no angel in the family which had been brought up on Wallandoon Station, New South Wales. When, within the next three days, Ruth received a note from Lady Dromard inviting them all to dinner at a very early date, she did not fail to

prod Erskine as he deserved. But her thrust was not malignant; nor did she give vexatious vent to her own triumph, which was considerable.

“You are a very clever man,” she merely told him, and with the relish of a wife who can say this from her heart; “but, you see, you’re wrong for once. Lady Dromard *did* mean what she said. She wants us all to dine there on Friday evening, when, as it happens, we have no other engagement; and really I don’t see how we can refuse.”

“You mean that you would like to get out of it if you could?” her husband said.

“You don’t need to be sarcastic,” remarked Ruth, with a slight flush. “Who wants to get out of it?”

“I thought perhaps you did, my dear; to tell you the truth, I rather hoped so.”

“You don’t want to go!”

“I can’t say I jump.”

Ruth coloured afresh.

"I have no patience with you, Erskine! Nobody is dying to go; but I own I can't see any reason against going, nor any excuse for stopping away; and considering what you yourself said about going to the garden-party, dear, I must say I think you're rather inconsistent."

Holland gazed down into the flushed, frowning face, that frowned so seldom, and flushed so prettily. Always an undemonstrative husband, very properly he had been more so than ever since others had been staying in the house. But neither of those others was present now, and rather suddenly he stooped and kissed his wife.

"There is no reason, and there would be no excuse; so you are quite right," he said kindly. "It's only that one has a constitutional dislike to being taken up—and dropped. I have visions of all that. I'm afraid Mrs. Willoughby has poisoned my mind; we will go, and let us hope it'll prove an antidote."

They went, and that dinner-party was not the formidable affair it might have been ; as Lady Dromard herself said, most graciously, it was not a dinner-party at all. Ten, however, sat down, of whom four came from the rectory ; for Herbert had been over to practise at the nets, and was fairly satisfied with his treatment on that occasion, which accounted for his presence on this. The only other guests were an inevitable divine and his wife. The Earl was absent. As if to conserve Christina's impression of the old clothes in which, as the natives said, his lordship "liked himself," Earl Dromard had left for London rather suddenly that morning. Lord Manister filled his place impeccably, with Ruth at her best on his right. Herbert was less happy with Lady Mary Dromard, a very proud person, who could also be very rude in the most elegant manner. But Christina fell to the jolliest scion of the house, Mr. Stanley Dromard ; and this pair mutually enjoyed themselves.

Young in every way was the Hon. Stanley Dromard. He had just left Eton, where he had been in the eleven, like his brother before him ; he was to go into residence at Trinity in October. With a quantum of gentlemanly interest he heard that Miss Luttrell's brother was also going up to Cambridge next term ; but not to Trinity. Said Mr. Dromard, " Your brother's a bit of a cricketer, too ; he came over for a knock the other day ; he means to play for us next week, if we're short, doesn't he ? " Christina fancied so ; Mr. Dromard said " Good ! " with some emphasis, and Herbert's name dropped out of the conversation. This became Anglo-Australian, as it was sure to, and led to some of those bold comparisons for which Christina was generally to be trusted ; but the bolder they were, the more Mr. Dromard enjoyed them, for the girl glittered in his eyes. He was a delightfully appreciative youth, if easily amused, and his laughter sharpened Tiny's wits. She

shone consciously, but yet calmly, and made a really remarkable impression upon her companion, without once meeting Lord Manister's glance, which rested on her sometimes for a second.

So the flattering attentions of young Dromard were not terminated, but merely interrupted, by the flight of the ladies. When the men followed them to the drawing-room, the younger son shot to Miss Luttrell's side with the fine regardlessness of nineteen, and furthered their friendship by divulging the Mundham plans for the following week. The cricket was to begin on the Tuesday. The men were coming the day before: half the Eton eleven, Tiny understood, and some older young fellows of Manister's standing. The first two were to be two-day matches against the county and a Marylebone team. The Saturday's match would be between Mundham Hall and another scratch eleven, "and that's when we may want your

brother, Miss Luttrell," added Mr. Dromard, "though we *might* want him before. Our team has been made up some time, but somebody is sure to have some other fixture for Saturday."

"I think he may like to play," said Christina.

Mr. Dromard seemed a little surprised.

"It's a jolly ground," he remarked, "and there will be some first-rate players."

"I am sure he would like a game on your ground," Christina went so far as to say.

"Do you dance, Miss Luttrell?" asked the young man, after a pause.

"When I get the chance," said Christina.

He gazed at her a moment, and could imagine her dancing—with him.

"Suppose we were to do something of the kind here one evening between the matches; would you come?"

"If I got the chance," said Christina.

Dromard considered what he was saying.

"We ought to have a dance," he added, in a doubtful tone, as though the need were greater than the chance; "we really ought. But I don't suppose we shall; nothing is arranged, you see."

"You needn't hedge, Mr. Dromard," said the girl, smiling.

"Eh?"

"I shan't expect an invitation!"

She nodded knowingly as he blushed; but he had the great merit of being easily amused, and with another word she made him merry and at ease again. Not unreasonably, perhaps, a casual spectator might have suspected these two of a mild but immediate flirtation. Stanley, however, was at a safe and privileged age, and no eye was on him but his brother's. Lord Manister gave the impression of being a rather dignified person in his own home, but he was doing his gracious duty by the guests, none of whom seemed especially to occupy his attention,

while he was reasonably polite to all. It was he, too, who at length suggested to Lady Dromard that Miss Luttrell would probably sing something, if she were asked.

So Christina sang something—it hardly matters what. Her song was not a classic, but neither was it grossly popular. It was a pleasant song, pleasantly sung, and the entire absence of pretentiousness and of affectation in the song and the singing was more noticeable than the positive excellence of either. The girl had no greater voice than one would have expected of so small a person, but what she had was in keeping. Lady Dromard, however, had a more sensitive appreciation of good taste than of good music, and she asked for more. Christina sang successively something of Lassen's, and then "Last Night," taking the English words in each case. She played her own accompaniments, and felt little nervousness until her last song was finished, when it

certainly startled her to find Lady Dromard standing at her side.

“Thank you!” said the Countess, with considerable enthusiasm. “You sing delightfully, and you sing delightful songs. You must have been very well taught.”

“Mostly in the bush,” said Christina truthfully.

“You come from the bush!”

“But you had some lessons in Melbourne,” put in Ruth, who was visibly delighted.

“Oh yes, a few,” Tiny said, smiling; “as many as I was worth.”

“Ah, you shall tell me about Melbourne one day soon,” said Lady Dromard to the young girl. “Your sister has promised to come over and watch the cricket. I do hope you will come with her.”

Christina expressed her pleasure at the prospect, and taking the nearest seat, found Lord Manister leaning over the end of the piano and

looking down upon her with a rather sardonic smile.

“ You haven’t looked at me this evening,” he said to her under cover of the general conversation, which was now renewed. “ May I ask what I have done ? ”

“ Certainly you may ask, Lord Manister,” answered the girl, with immense simplicity “ but I can’t tell you, because I am not aware that you have done anything, beyond making us all very happy and at-home.”

“ Well, I’m glad to hear that,” said Manister, whose quasi-humorous tone lacked the lightness to deceive ; “ I was afraid I had offended you.”

“ Offended me ! ” cried Christina, with widening eyes and a puzzled look. “ When have you seen me to offend me ? I haven’t seen you since your garden-party, and you certainly didn’t offend me then — you were awfully nice to us all ! ”

“Ah, that wasn’t seeing you,” Lord Manister murmured. “I don’t reckon that I’ve seen you since—the photographs. I had to go to Scotland; I meant to tell you.”

“It wouldn’t have interested me,” said Christina, with a shrug. “It might have interested me if you had said—you were *not* going,” she added next moment. Her tone had dropped. She looked at him and smiled.

Her smile stayed with him after she was gone; but from his face you would not have guessed that he was nursing a kind look. She had given him one smile, which made up for many things. But you would have thought, with his people, that he had been suffering the whole evening from acute boredom: you might well have fancied, with Lady Mary, that a remark disparaging Australian women would have met with a grateful response from him. The response it did meet with was anything but grateful to Lady Mary Dromard. It drove her from the

room, in which Manister and his mother were presently left alone.

“I think you were just,” the Countess said, critically. “They are pleasant people, and quite all right. The young man is their weak point.”

“They always are,” her son remarked, rather savagely still. “They’re larrikins !”

“The young girl was especially nice : and sang like a lady.”

“Ah, you approve of her,” said Lord Manister, dryly.

“Entirely, I think. Evidently you don’t. I only saw you speak to her once, towards the end. Yet she has met you in Australia ; I should have recognised that, I think. Now her people,” Lady Dromard added tentatively, “will be rather superior, I suppose, as Colonials go ?”

“Well, they’re rich ; I suppose that’s how Colonials go.”

For one moment Lady Dromard fancied that the sneer was for the Colonials, and it surprised

her; the next, she took it to herself, and very meekly for so proud a heart.

“My dear boy!” she murmured indulgently. “Apart from their people, these girls—for the married one is as young as she has any right to be—strike one as fresh, and free, and pleasing. And they are ladies. Am I to believe that the majority out there are like them?”

Manister shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s as you please, my dear mother. These people didn’t strike me as the only decent ones in Melbourne. I did meet others.”

The Countess tapped her foot upon the fender, and took counsel with her own reflection in the mirror, for she was standing before the fireplace while her son wandered about the room—her son with the reputation for a childlike devotion to his mother. There had been little of that sort of devotion since his return from Australia. Nothing between them was as it had been before. This bitter coldness had been his domestic

manner—his manner with her of all people—longer than the mother could bear. She knew the reason ; she had tried to tell him so ; she had tried to speak freely to him of the whole matter—even penitently, if he would. But he had never spoken freely to her ; and once he had refused to speak at all, then or thenceforth. Lady Dromard had made a resolve then which she remembered now.

“ Really, Harry, I can’t make you out,” she said lightly, at length. “ You knock down the Colonials with one hand, and you set them up with the other, as though they were so many ninepins. I am puzzled to know what you really mean, and what you mean satirically. You never used to be satirical, Harry ! I should like to know whether you really approve of these people, or whether you don’t.”

“ I do approve of them,” said Lord Manister, halting on the rug before his mother. “ I won’t put it more strongly. But I am glad that you

should have seen there are such things as ladies in Australia ! ”

Their eyes met, and the mother forgot her resolve ; for he had raised the subject himself, and for the first time.

“ You think of her still ! ” whispered Lady Dromard.

“ Of course I do,” returned Manister, roughly ; and again he was striding about the room.

Never in her life, perhaps, had the Countess received a sharper hurt : for he had refused to see the hand she had reached out to him involuntarily. Yet assuredly Lady Dromard had never spoken in a more ordinary tone than that of her next words, a minute later.

“ It occurred to me, Harry, that if we really think of dancing one evening during the cricket-week, we might do worse than ask these people from the rectory. You must have girls to dance with. Still, if you think better not, you have only to say so.”

“I think it’s for you to decide ; but if you ask me, I don’t see the least objection to it,” said Lord Manister, with a smooth ceremony that had a sharper edge than his rough words. “I’m not sure, however, that they will come every time you ask them.”

“Pourquoi?”

“Because they’re the most independent people in the world, the Australians.”

“It would scarcely touch their independence,” said Lady Dromard, with careless contempt; “but we can really do without them, and I am glad of your hint, because now I shall not think of asking them.”

“Now, my dear mother,” cried Lord Manister, no longer either hot or cold, but his old self for once, in his anxiety—“you misunderstand me entirely! I’m not great on a dance at all, but if we’re to have one, we must, as you say, have somebody to dance with; and I *want* you to ask these people.”

CHAPTER X.

A THREATENING DAWN.

"I LIKE a dance where you can dance," said Herbert, who was looking at himself in a glass and wondering how long his white tie had been on one side. "It was worth fifty of the swell show you took us to in town, Ruth."

"I am glad you two have enjoyed it so," returned Ruth, with her eye, however, upon her husband. "Of course, there's a great difference between a big dance in town and a little one in the country."

Tiny seemed busy. She was tearing her programme into small pieces, and dropping them at her feet, so that when she had gone up to bed it was as though a paper-chase had passed through the rectory study, where they had all

gathered for a few moments on their return from the dance. Christina, however, was not too preoccupied to chime in on her own note:

"It's like the difference between Riverina and Victoria—there were acres to the sheep instead of sheep to the acre."

Now there was no merit in this speech, but to those who understood it the comparison was apt, and Erskine knew enough of Australia to understand. Moreover, he had taught Tiny to listen for his laugh. So when he made neither sound nor sign, the girl felt injured, but remembered that he had been extremely silent on the way home. And he was the first to go up-stairs.

"It has bored him," observed Christina.

"He don't like dancing," said Herbert.
"He's no sportsman."

"I am afraid he cares for nothing but lawn-tennis when he's here," sighed Ruth, who looked a little troubled. "I am afraid he dislikes going out in the country."

They were silent for some minutes before Tiny exclaimed with conviction—

“No; it’s the Dromards he dislikes.”

And presently they made a move from the room. But on the stairs they met Erskine coming down, having changed his dress suit for flannels; and Ruth followed him back to the study, eyeing the change with dismay.

“Surely you’re not going to sit up at this hour?”

Ruth had raised her glance from his flannels to his face, which troubled her more.

“I’m afraid the fine weather’s at an end,” Erskine answered, crookedly; “it’s most awfully close, at any rate. And I want a pipe.”

He proceeded to fill one with his back to her.

“Erskine!”

“Well, dear?”

“I won’t be ‘dear’ to you when you’re cross with me. I want to know what I have done to vex you.”

He had struck a match, and he lit his pipe before answering. Then he said, gently enough :

“If you think I’m cross with you, I should run away to bed ; I certainly don’t mean to be.”

But he had not turned round.

“You succeed, at any rate ! As you seem to wish it, I shall take your advice.”

Erskine heard her on the stairs with a twinge in his heart. He went to the door to call her down and be frank with her, but the shutting of her own door checked him. Setting this one ajar, he threw up the window, and stood frowning at the opaque pall that seemed to have been let down behind it like an outer blind. So he remained for some minutes before remembering the easy-chair. No one knew better than Erskine that he had just been unkind to his wife. He was not pleased with her, but he had refused to explain his displeasure when she invited him to do so. There was this difficulty in explain-

ing it—that he knew it to be unreasonable, since the person who had vexed him most was not Ruth, but Christina. And not more reasonable was his disappointment in Christina, as he also knew. Yet the one thing in life not disappointing to him at the moment was his pipe; even the fine weather was most surely at an end.

He was tired of the rectory, which, wet or fair, had no longer either light or shadow of its own, for both were now absorbed in the deepening shadow of the Hall. A week ago they had all dined there, now they had been dancing there, and meanwhile the girls had watched one of the matches, and were going to another. Erskine had been opposed to the dance, but the wife had prevailed; he was against their going to another match, but doubtless Ruth would have her way again: for she had shown a tenacity of purpose that surprised him in her, while he was crippled by a conscious lack of logic in his objections. He was not an arbitrary person, and it seemed that Ruth would

stop for nothing less than a command where her heart was set; and her sister was with her. The whole trouble was, where their hearts were set.

He tried hard not to think the worst of Tiny, or rather, the worst as it seemed to him. To make it easier, he called to mind various things she had said to him at various times concerning Lord Manister, of whom she had seldom failed to make fun. It amused and consoled Erskine to remember the fun: there must be hope for her still. Then he recalled common gossip about Lord Manister and his affairs; and there was hope on that side too. In less than a week the danger would be past, and those two would never see each other again. Consideration of the danger he had in mind, *quâ* danger, provoked a smile. Tiny herself would have enjoyed the humour of that; she was so quick to see and to enjoy. But she could appreciate more than a joke, or did she only pretend to like those books?

And the soul that shone sometimes in her eyes, did it lie much deeper? She interested Erskine the more because he could not be sure. She was a fascinating study to him, whatever she did or was trying to do. In any case, there was much good in her that he had fathomed, and more was suggested; and the finer the nature, the stronger the contrasts. Now as to contrasts . . . yet he had never seen that in Australia.

“A penny for your thoughts!”

Ten thousand pounds would not have bought them. It was his wife on the threshold, in a pale pink wrapper.

“My dear! I pictured you asleep hours ago.”

“Were you picturing me when I spoke?” Ruth said with a smile. “I’m not sleepy—and I want to talk to you. May I sit down? An hour more or less makes no difference at this time of the morning.”

Erskine rose from the easy-chair in which he

had been smoking, and settled his wife in it against her will, and drew the curtains across the open window.

“I’m glad you’ve come down, Ruth, for I want to speak to you, too. I was a brute to you when I sent you away just now.”

“Well, I really think you were; but I know you must have had some reason; so I’ve come down to have it out and be done with it.”

“My dear Ruth!” said Mr. Holland, uncomfortably; for was there any call to be frank with her at all? It would hurt; and could it do any good?

“I suppose,” pursued Ruth, in a tone not perfectly free from defiance, “it’s all because we went to this horrid dance! And I’ll say I’m sorry we did go, if you like; though why you should have such a down on the Dromards, I can’t for the life of me imagine.”

“My dear girl,” said Erskine, smiling now that he had determined not to say everything,

“I really have no down on them at all. They’re the most amiable family I know, considering who they are. They have a charming place, and they treat you delightfully while you’re there. Considering who *we* are, and that we have no root in this soil, I grant you they’re particularly kind to us; but don’t you think their kindness is just a little trying? I do, though I have nothing against them, personally or otherwise. I am not even a political opponent; if I had a vote for the division, young Manister should have it. But I’m not keen on so much notice from them; I’ve said so before; there’s no sense in it!”

“Ah well, if only you would show me the harm in it!”

“Harm? Heaven forbid there should be any. One finds it a bore, that’s all. It’s a selfish reason, but it’s the truth—I should have had a better time this last week if the Dromards had been far enough!”

“And we should have had a worse—Tiny and I. No, Erskine, I know you better than you think; you’re not so selfish as all that; there’s some other reason.”

Erskine turned away with a shrug, to avoid her glance.

“Something has annoyed you to-night. One of us has behaved badly. Was it Tiny or was it——”

“You?” said Erskine, with a smile. “From what I saw of your behaviour, my dear, it was entirely creditable to you as a chaperon. Your face was seventeen, but your air was a frank fifty!”

“Then it was Tiny. I suppose she danced too much with those boys they have staying in the house. I should have thought there was respectability in numbers; I really don’t see how *they* could matter.”

“They seemed to matter to Manister,” remarked Erskine, dryly.

Ruth winced, but he had wondered whether she would, or he would never have noticed it.

“Surely you don’t think Lord Manister cares who dances with our Tiny?”

The amusement in her tone and manner was cleverly feigned, but, instead of deceiving Erskine, it spurred him to speak out after all.

“I hardly like to tell you what I think about Tiny and Lord Manister,” he said gravely.

“What on earth do you mean, Erskine?” cried Ruth, reddening. “Now you *must* tell me!”

Erskine temporised, already regretting that he had said so much. “It would hurt your feelings,” he warned her grimly.

“Not so much as your silence.”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t look on her as my own sister, by this time, and if I didn’t think her the best little girl in the world—but one.”

Now he spoke tenderly.

"Say it, in any case," said Ruth, who had become uncommonly calm.

"Then I am afraid she is making up to him, if you must know."

"Which is absurd," said Ruth lightly; but in her anxiety to remain cool she forgot to seem surprised; and that was a mistake.

"I wonder if you really think so?" said her husband, very quietly. "If you do, I can't agree with you; I wish I could."

"You must!" cried Ruth desperately. "Do you know how many dances she gave him to-night?"

Erskine knew only of one; his eyes rested on the remains of her programme, lying on the floor in many fragments.

"Well, that one was the lot!" he was informed severely. "And pray did you count how many times she spoke to him the other evening when we dined at the hall?"

"Not often, I grant you; I noticed that."

“ Yet you think she is making up to him ! ”

“ It’s a strong way of putting it, I know,” said Erskine, reluctantly ; “ but really, I can’t think of any other. I wonder you don’t realise that there are more ways of making up to a man than the dead-set method. Can’t you see that a far more effective method is a little judicious snubbing and avoiding, which is coquetry ? You take my word for it, that’s the touch for a man like Manister, who is, probably, accustomed to everything but being snubbed and avoided. Then you speak of the one dance she gave him. Now, I happen to know that they didn’t dance it at all ; they spent the time under the stars, for it was my misfortune to see them, and their misfortune not to see me.”

“ Well ? ” whispered Ruth ; and though she had been never so dark until now, that whisper would have drawn his lantern to her real hopes and fears.

“ I only saw them for an instant : I bolted :

so I may easily be wrong ; but it struck me that our Tiny was making up for her snubbing and avoiding. It has since occurred to me that they must have known each other rather well in Melbourne—rather better, at any rate, than you have ever led me to suppose.”

As a woman’s last resource, Ruth aimed a stone at his temper.

“So that’s it !” she exclaimed viciously..

“That’s what ? ”

“The secret of your bad temper.”

“Well, to be kept in the dark doesn’t sweeten a man, certainly,” Erskine answered, in a tone, however, that was far from bitter. “Then, one can’t help feeling disappointed with Tiny ; and in this matter—to be frank with you at last—I am just a little disappointed in you too, my dear.”

“I always knew you would be,” said Ruth, dolefully. For her stone had missed, and there was no more fight in her.

“Now don’t be a goose. It’s only in this

one matter, in which—I can't help telling you—I don't think you've been perfectly straight with me."

"Oh, indeed!" cried Ruth, as her spirit made one spurt more. It was the last. The next moment she was weeping.

It annoys most men to make a woman cry. Those who do not become annoyed, make impetuous atonement, partly, no doubt, to drown the hooting in their own heart. But Erskine could not feel himself to blame, and though he spoke very kindly, his kindness was too nearly paternal, and he spoke with his elbow on the chimney-piece. He told Ruth not to do that. He pointed out to her that there was no crime in her want of candour concerning her sister's affairs, which were certainly no business of his. Only, if there really had been something between Christina and Lord Manister in Melbourne—if, for instance, Mrs. Willoughby had gossiped unwittingly to Christina about none

other than Christina herself—Erskine put it to his wife that she might have done more wisely to place him in a position silently to appreciate such capital jokes. He would have said nothing; but as it was he might easily have said much to imperil the situation: in fact, he had been in a false position all along, more especially at the hall. But that was all. There was really nothing to cry about. Perhaps to give her the fairest opportunity to compose herself, Erskine crossed the room and drew back the curtains to let in the gray morning; for the birds had long been twittering.

But Ruth had been waiting for the touch of his hand, and he had only given her kind words. She looked up, and saw through her tears his form against the gray window, as he shut down the sash. The lamp burnt faintly, and in the two wan lights it was a chamber of misery, in which one could not sit alone. Ruth rose and ran to Erskine, and laid her hands upon his arm.

"It is raining," he said, without looking at her tears. "I knew we were in for a break-up of the fine weather."

"Never mind the rain!" Ruth cried piteously, with her face upon his coat. "Will you forgive me now, if I tell you everything that I know—everything? It isn't much, because Tiny has been almost as close with me as I have been with you."

"My dear," he said, patting her head at last, and with his arms around her lightly, "you both had a perfect right to be close."

"But suppose I've been at the bottom of the whole thing? Suppose I turn out a horrid little intriguer?—what then?"

She waited eagerly, and the pause seemed long.

"Well, you won't have been intriguing for yourself," sighed Erskine—so that her face rose on his breast, as on a wave.

And then, playing nervously with a button

of his coat, Ruth confessed all. As she spoke she gathered confidence, but not enough to watch his face. That was turned to the gray morning, and looked as gray as it. The fine weather had indeed broken up, and Essingham had lost its savour for Erskine Holland.

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